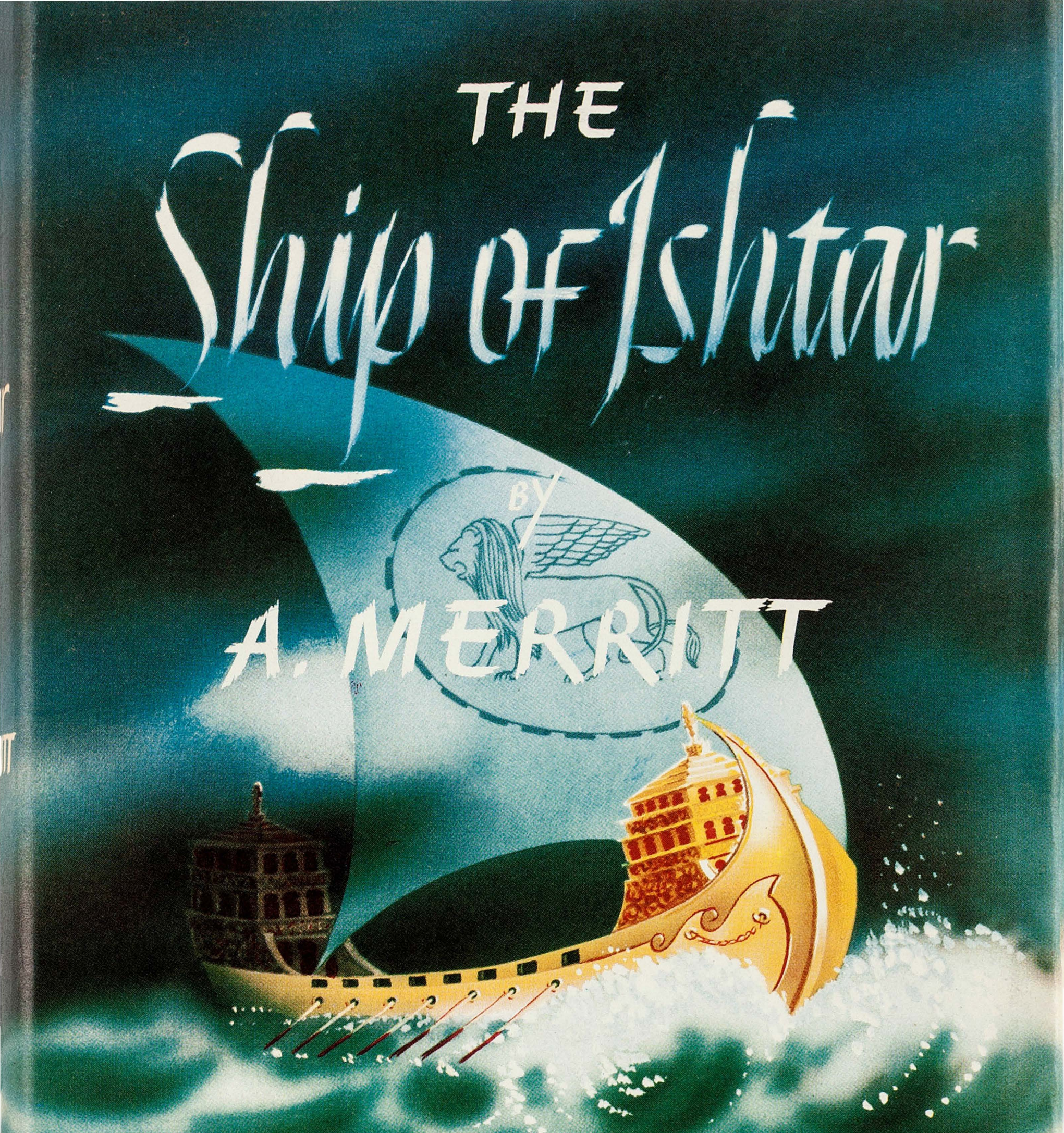
THE Ship of Ishtar

BY

A. MERRITT



Illustrated by VIRGIL FINLAY

MEMORIAL EDITION

Cir-lin

THE Ship OF Ishtar

BY

A. MERRITT

In memory of A. Merritt,
the Lord of Fantasy;

Virgil
Finlay

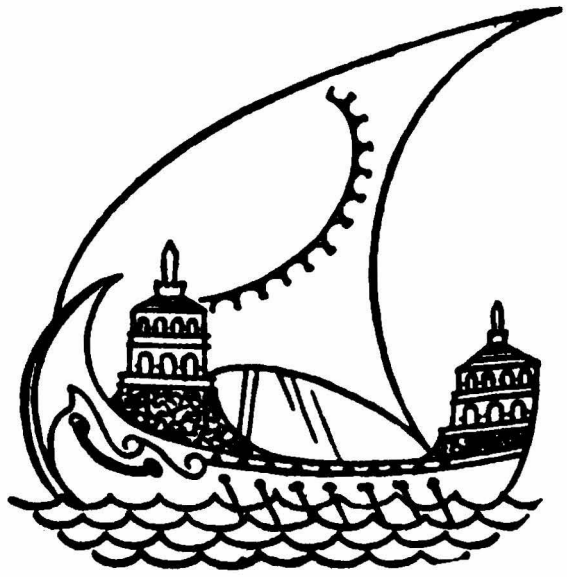
THE SHIP OF ISHTAR

MEMORIAL EDITION

The SHIP OF ISHTAR

BY

A. Merritt



Illustrated by VIRGIL FINLAY

BORDEN PUBLISHING COMPANY

LOS ANGELES · TORONTO

COPYRIGHT 1924 BY A. MERRITT

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
THIS MEMORIAL EDITION OF "THE SHIP OF ISHTAR"
WAS DESIGNED AND PRODUCED BY
GRAPHIC HOUSE ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

THE SHIP OF ISHTAR

THE BLOCK FROM BABYLON

Chapter One

JOHN KENTON STARED DOWN AT THE GREAT BLOCK, VAGUELY puzzled, vaguely disturbed. Strange, he thought, yes, strange, indeed, how all his unrest, his formless longings, his haunting unhappiness seemed to center upon it. It was as though the block drew them to it—like a magnet of stone. And was there subtle promise in that focusing?

He stirred impatiently; drew out again Forsyth's letter. It had come to him three days before, that message from the old archæologist who, by means of Kenton's wealth, was sifting for its age-long-lost secrets the dust of what had once been all-conquering Babylon.

Eagerly had Kenton desired, eagerly had he planned, to go with that expedition. All his life the past had called to him. During all his years he had hearkened to its calling. He had wandered in the forgotten places; had slept upon the sites of forgotten civilizations, dead empires, vanished cities. In those years he had let love pass him by; had thrilled to ghostly romance rather than to living. Scholarly, half an ascetic, if he amassed no lore of the

heart he garnered another knowledge vivid enough to make savants listen with respect when he spoke.

But on the very eve of his sailing, America had entered into the World War. And Kenton had bade Forsyth go without him. He himself had gone into training for a commission; he had fought and been wounded in Belleau Wood; had been invalided home. Hag-ridden by a great restlessness, thus he had returned; his attitude toward life, like thousands of others, profoundly changed. The world he knew had lost its zest; the one in which he could be happy he did not know where to find; he could not formulate even what it might be. The war had turned the present to quicksand beneath his feet: worse, it had destroyed that bridge to the past over which his soul had been gay to tread.

Yet something in Forsyth's letter had touched with life an interest he had believed dead; had evoked specter of that once familiar span between the then and the now: there was an echo within him as from some far, faint, summoning voice bidding that old self of his to awaken—to awaken and to—beware!

And with a certain grim wonder he had found himself awaiting with impatience the arrival of the thing the letter had promised.

It had been cleared through the customs that afternoon—the block from Babylon. Alone, with an ever more eager curiosity, he had opened the crate that held it. Nested within that crate among cotton strips and soft sheathings of reeds had been the great stone block. Stone? Then why had it been so curiously light?

Again that thought came to him as he stood there beside it. The long mirror at the end of the room reflected him as he mused. Slender, a little above the medium height, face dark and keen, suggestion of the hawk in it with the thin, curved nose and clear blue eyes set widely apart, chin a bit pointed and cleft. And at the corners of the firm lips and deep within the clear eyes a touch

of bitterness and of weary disillusionment—the hall mark of the war. Such was John Kenton as the long mirror showed him on the night-dawn of his great adventure.

He read once more the letter, which Forsyth had written:

I send you the block because it bears a record of Sargon of Akkad, one of the few ever discovered of that king. It is unusual in many ways. Frankly, I have not been able to discover its purpose. I send it to you to amuse you in your convalescence; with the leisure time at your disposal you may be able to interpret what I, in the press of immediate work, cannot.

In the inscriptions upon it there is over and over again the name of Ishtar, Mother Goddess, Goddess of Love, Goddess of War and Wrath and Vengeance—as well. It is mostly in this last aspect of her that I read the symbols. The name of Nabu, the Babylonian God of Wisdom, appears many times; but text and context are so mutilated that, beyond words that seem to carry a warning of some kind, the references to Nabu are undecipherable. The name of Nergal, God of the Assyrian Underworld, appears frequently. But here, too, the text is too far gone to reconstruct—at least, in the little time that I have.

There are other names: Zarpanit—a woman's, Alusar—a man's. In the Babylonian pantheon, as you know, Zarpanit or Sarpanit was the wife of the God Bel Merodach, and a lesser form of Ishtar. But in the absence of certain characters I believe that the Zarpanit referred to here was an actual woman, probably some priestess of the goddess. As the name of Alusar occurs always near the name of Nergal he was probably a priest of that exceedingly grim deity.

We found the block in the mound called 'Amran, just south of the Qser or "palace" of Nabopolassor. There is evi-

dence that the 'Amran mound is the site of E-Sagilla, the ZIGGURAT *or terraced temple which was the Home of the Gods in Babylon. It must have been held in considerable reverence, for only so would it have been saved from the destruction of the city by Sennacherib and afterward have been placed in the rebuilt temple.*

Kenton folded the letter; looked down again upon the block. Once more his eyes measured it—four feet long, probably a trifle more, four feet high and about three wide. A faded yellow, its centuries hung about it like a half visible garment. Its surfaces were scarred and pitted: originally they must have been smooth and polished as porcelain. Through the scratches and defacements the inscriptions ran, now submerged, now emerging—like bent straws in a frozen, yellow pool.

He ran a hand over it. The material mystified him; it was not stone nor any of the baked clays of the age with which he was so familiar. It was some composite, unknown. Most was it like cement of ivory sifted with dust of pearls; compact and finely grained, with tiny iridescent glints darting out of the wan yellows.

Kenton began to study the inscriptions. Archaic cuneatic, these; most ancient. There were the names of Zarpanit and Alusar. There were the arrowed symbols of Ishtar the Glorious, of the Dark Nergal, of Blue Nabu, the Giver of Wisdom. They were repeated many, many times—all of them. And always there was the persistent sign of warning—over and over again and linked always with the name of Nabu.

Curious, he thought, how baffling the inscriptions were. It was fanciful—of course it was fanciful—yet it was as though a veil lay between him and them; as though, just when he was on the brink of understanding, something reached out and muddied his mind.

And now Kenton became aware of a fragrance stealing about him; a fragrance vague and caressing, wistful and wandering—like entwined souls of flowers that had lost their way. Sweet was that fragrance and alluring; wholly strange and within it something that changed the rhythm of his life to its own alien pulse. He leaned over the block—the scented swirls drew round him, clinging like little hands; scented spirals of fragrance that supplicated, that pleaded—softly, passionately.

Pleaded—for release!

A wave of impatience swept him; he drew himself up. The fragrance was nothing but perfumes mixed with the substance of the block and now sending forth their breath through the heated room. What nonsense was this that he was dreaming? He struck the block sharply with closed hand.

The block answered the blow!

It murmured. The murmuring grew louder. Louder still, with muffled bell tones like muted *carillons* of jade deep within. They grew stronger, more vibrant. The murmuring ceased; now there were only the high, sweet chimings. Clearer and ever more clear they sounded, drawing closer, ringing up and on through endless tunnels of time.

There was a sharp crackling. It splintered the chimings; shattered and stilled them. The block split. Pulsed from the break a radiance as of rosy pearls, and throbbing in its wake came wave after wave of the fragrance. But no longer questing, no longer wistful nor supplicating.

Jubilant now! Triumphant!

Something was inside the block! Something hidden there since Sargon of Akkad had reigned, sixty centuries ago!

Kenton started to ring for his servants, stopped—jealously.

For the radiance streaming from the block was more than that of jewel. It was like the living breast of a goddess breaking through a shroud of stone.

Let other than himself uncover what lay within? Behold it uncovered?

No!

He ran from the room; came swiftly back with tools to free whatever was that shining wonder which for sixty centuries had been entombed within the block.

THE FREEING OF THE SHIP

Chapter Two

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE BLOCK WAS SINGULARLY HARD AND dense. It resisted him: it seemed to fight against the steel. Bit by bit he drilled and chiseled away the stubborn matrix, working along the edges of the crack through which streamed the prisoned radiance.

Suddenly the block shuddered like a living thing. Rang out again that *carillon* of bells of jade. Sharply it pealed, then turned and fled back through the corridors of time. Fainter became the chiming, fainter still. It died: and as it died the block collapsed, disintegrated; became a swirling, slowly settling cloud of sparkling dust.

Out of that cloud the alien, unfamiliar fragrance swarmed; leaped on Kenton, clung to him. For another instant the cloud whirled, a vortex of glittering mist. It vanished like a curtain plucked away.

There on the floor where the block had been, stood a ship! It was a jeweled craft of enchantment; such a bark as jinn of Aladdin's day might have made for elfin princesses to sail ensorcelled seas!

It floated high on a base of little lace-tipped waves, billowets fragile and delicate, carved from turquoise, crested with milky rock crystals. Three feet in length from bow to stern, its hull, too, was of crystal, creamy and faintly luminous. Its prow was shaped like a slender scimitar, bent backward. Under the incurved tip was a cabin whose seaward sides were formed, galleon fashion, by the upward thrust of port and starboard bows. Where the hull drew up to form this cabin, a faint flush warmed the cloudy crystal; deepened as the sides grew higher; gleamed at last with a rosy radiance that turned the cabin into a great jewel.

In the center of the ship, taking up more than a third of its length, was a pit. Down to its railed edge from the bow sloped a deck of ivory as fallow as the yellow of a rising moon upon a night in spring. But the deck that sloped from the stern was a jet black; another cabin rested there, smaller than that at the bow, and squat and ebon. Both decks continued on each side of the pit in two wide platforms. At the exact center of the ship—and with an odd suggestion of contending force—the ivory and the black decks met. They did not fade into each other; they ended there abruptly, edge to edge: hostile.

Up from the pit arose one tall mast; tapering; green as the carven core of some immense emerald. From its cross-sticks a wide sail of peacock iridescence stretched, ruffled as by a carven breeze, shimmering like silk turned to opal. From mast and yards fell stays of twisted dull gold.

Out of each side swept a single bank of seven great oars, their scarlet blades dipped deep within the white-crested azure of the waves. At the ship's bow hung golden chains and at her stern swung chains of jet.

And the jeweled craft was manned. Why, Kenton wondered, had he not seen the tiny figures before! It was as though they had arisen from the deck. One had just slipped out of the rosy cabin's

door, an arm was still outstretched in its closing. It was a woman. And there were other women shapes upon the ivory deck, three of them, crouching; their heads were bent low; two clasped harps and the third held a double flute. Little figures, not more than two inches high.

Toys!

It was most odd that he could not distinguish their faces, nor the details of their dress. The toys were indistinct, blurred, as though a veil covered them; a veil like that which had so obscured the cuneiform inscription. He thought that the blurring might be the fault of his eyes. The freeing of the ship had not been easy; had demanded unwavering attention; his eyes might well be weary. Or perhaps it was that rose pearl radiance from the bow that dazzled him?

Kenton looked down upon the clouded stern. His uneasy, groping perplexity deepened. The black deck had been empty—this he could have sworn. But now four manikins clustered there, close to the rail of the pit!

He tried with all the strength in his fingers to lift one of them. He could not move it; it seemed part of the deck itself. Methodically he tugged at each of the other toys, and with the same result. He stared into the pit. There were toys in there, too—oarsmen; many of them. He counted two at each oar, one standing and one sitting; twenty-eight of them, and each in chains.

A detail of the cabined bow struck him. It was indeed astonishing, he thought again, how he kept missing these details—how, like the little figures, they seemed suddenly to strike into sight!

There was a ledge halfway up the cabin. On it were dwarfed trees blossoming with hundreds of tiny jewels. Birds were nestling along the ledge, scores of them; there were other scores clustering in the gemmed branches. They were white birds with ruby bills and scarlet feet and shining ruby eyes. What were they? Why—they were doves, of course.

The doves of Ishtar!

And this—this—

This was the Ship of Ishtar!

He caught himself up, wonder deepening. Whence had come that thought? What did he know of any Ship of Ishtar?

The haze around the toys was growing thicker. Certainly it must be that his eyes were tired. He would lie down a while and rest them. He walked to the door; assured himself that it was locked; turned.

All the side of the room beyond the ship was hidden by swirling silver mists that, thickening swiftly, closed in even as he stared, unbelieving, upon the mystery he had freed!

And as the mists touched it, enveloped it, the ship rocked and swayed and swiftly as the thickening of those vapors began to grow!

He glimpsed a movement upon the decks. The figures, the toys—were stirring!

The oars were lifting; were sweeping through the waters!

The gleaming hull shot up, carrying the moving shapes high above his vision.

And now there was a shrilling as of armies of storm, a roaring as of myriads of tempests, a shrieking chaos as though down upon him swept the mighty torrent of the winds that race between the stars. The room seemed to split into thousands of fragments; to dissolve.

Kenton had one fleeting, incredible glimpse of the turreted skyline of New York vanishing beneath the onrush of a vast blue, rushing sea whose gigantic, foam-flecked combers were surging over it; were drowning it!

For a heart beat, towers and turrets stood sharp against the flood like a picture on a screen.

Then—they were gone!

Down upon Kenton raced the azure, unbelievable ocean.

Clear through the howling clamor came the chiming of a bell—one—two. It was his clock ringing out the hour of six. The third note began; was stilled as though cut in twain.

The solid floor on which he stood melted away. For an instant he felt himself suspended in space. In front of him loomed the bow of the ship. Its crescented prow leaped toward him, then dropped as though the ship slid down the valley of a wave.

The shrieking, roaring voices of those tempests whose breath he heard, but did not feel abruptly ceased to be.

The crescented prow swept under him; a score of feet below him the ivoried deck was flashing by.

Kenton dropped!

As though to meet him, the deck rose swiftly. He felt a numbing shock, a fiery pain through his head. Splintered lightnings veined a blackness that wiped out sight both of ship and sea.

Then only the blackness.

Chapter Three

KENTON LAY LISTENING TO A SOFT WHISPERING; PERSISTENT, continuous. It was like the breaking crests of little waves. The sound was all about him; a rippling susurration growing steadily more insistent. A light beat through his closed lids. He felt motion beneath him, a gentle, cradling lift and fall. He opened his eyes.

He was on a ship, on a narrow deck, his head against the bulwarks. Before him was a mast rising out of a pit. Inside the pit he caught a glimpse of men straining at great oars. The mast seemed to be of wood covered with translucent, emerald lacquer. It stirred reluctant memories.

Where had he seen such a mast before?

His gaze crept up the shining shaft. There was a wide sail; a sail made of silk of opal, and bellying in the breath of a scented breeze. Low overhead hung a sky that was all a soft mist of silver.

Kenton heard a girl's voice, low and sweet. He sat up, dizzily. At his right he saw a templed cabin nestling under the curved tip of a sickled prow; it gleamed rosily. A balcony ran around

it. Small trees blossomed on that balcony; while birds with feet and bills crimson as though dipped in wine of rubies flew and fluttered among the branches.

And suddenly he remembered the block from Babylon—the ship of enchantment he had freed from it. Swift upon that memory came realization, staggering, incredible.

He was on that ship—the Ship of Ishtar!

The girl's voice sounded again; was answered by a deep-toned golden other, in whose liquidly throaty notes was vibrant a debonair imperiousness. His gaze coursed along that trail of golden sound, leaped over the three women kneeling at its source; it fastened upon one face and hung there.

Never had he beheld such a woman!

Tall, willow-lithe, flame-slender she stood, staring beyond him. Her wide eyes beneath straight, daintily fine black brows were green as shoals of tropic seas, of depths of forest glens. Like sea and woods, they were filled with drifting, mysterious shadows. Her head was small; the features fine; the red mouth delicately amorous. In the hollow of her throat a dimple lay; a chalice for kisses; empty of them and eager to be filled.

Above her brows a silver crescent was set, slim as a newborn moon. Over each horn of the crescent poured a flood of red-gold hair, framing the lovely face, streaming down over high, bare breasts, falling in ringlets almost to sandaled feet. Pale pearls and rosy gems gleamed in those red-gold waves like jeweled drops of dew.

Were she maid or woman, Kenton could not tell. As young as spring she seemed—yet wise as autumn; Primavera of some archaic Botticelli—but Mona Lisa, too. If virginal in body, certainly not in soul.

He followed her mocking gaze. It led him to the door of the black cabin, where stood a man. Taller by a head than Kenton, massively built, his pale gray eyes stared unwinkingly upon the

woman, somberly menacing, impassively malignant. His face was beardless, pallid, heavy and cruel. Despite his bulk his pose was snakelike; and in the pale eyes serpent and wolf were mated. His huge and flattened head was shaven; his great nose vulture-beaked; and from his shoulders black robes fell, shrouding him to his feet.

Behind him were three others, with shaven heads. Two were as still as he, and as deadly; each of the twain held a brazen, conch-shaped horn.

On the third Kenton's eyes lingered, fascinated. His pointed chin rested on a tall drum whose curved sides glistened with the diamonded skin of the royal python. He squatted, huge torso bare, knotted and gnarled, prodigiously powerful. His apelike arms were wound around the barreled tambour; spiderlike were the long fingers standing upon their tips on the drum head.

But it was the face that held Kenton. Sardonic, malicious—there was in it none of that evil concentrate in the others. The wide slit of his mouth was froglike; humor was on the thin lips. His deep-set, twinkling-black eyes dwelt upon the woman with frank admiration. From the lobes of his outstanding ears hung disks of jet.

Kenton felt a quick glow of friendliness for this squatting incarnation of satyr ugliness.

The woman paced swiftly down toward Kenton. When she halted he could have reached out a hand and touched her. Yet she did not seem to see him! Indeed, this was part of the strangeness of his first adventure upon the ship—that none heeded him; gave no hint of knowledge that he was there.

"Ho—Klaneth!" she cried. "Ho—Worm of Pestilence! I hear the voice of Ishtar! She is drawing near! Are you ready to do her homage, Worm of Nergal?"

A flicker of hate passed over the pallid face, like a little wave from hell.

"The House of the Goddess brims with light, Sharane," the man answered with a voice thick and dead and in some way foul. "But tell me, temple drab—does not my Dread Lord's shadow thicken behind me?"

Now Kenton saw that from the rosy temple a light was pulsing, stronger and ever stronger like a waxing moon within gigantic pearl; while down upon the black cabin gloom was gathering like a storm cloud!

"Yea!" mocked the woman. "The goddess comes! And your Dark Lord speeds to meet her! But why should that make you rejoice? For lo—she gives me clean strength ten thousandfold! And what are you, Klaneth, but a drain through which pours that filth you worship as Nergal!"

Now at this the two priests with the horns thrust themselves forward, gesturing, howling imprecations at the woman. The pale, cruel face of Klaneth grew grayer still and writhed with hate; he raised clenched hands, and from his mouth, flecked with foam, came a dreadful hissing.

A sudden wind smote the ship, like an opened hand, heeling it. From the doves burst a tumult of cries; they flew up like a little white cloud flecked with crimson; they fluttered around the woman. Three quick, backward steps she took.

The apelike arms of the frog-mouth drummer unwrapped, his spidery fingers poised over the head of the snake drum. The blackness deepened about him; hid him; cloaked all the ship's stern.

Kenton felt vast presences seize the ship—felt the gathering of fearful, unknown forces. He slid down on his haunches, pressed himself against the bulwarks. From the ivory deck blared a golden trumpeting; defiant; inhuman. Kenton turned his head, and on it the hair lifted and prickled.

Where the woman had been was now—no woman!

Resting on the rosy cabin was a great orb, an orb like the moon

at full; but not like the moon, white and cold—an orb alive with pulsing roseate candescence. Out over the ship it poured its living, rosy rays and, bathed in them, the woman loomed—gigantic. The lids of the glorious eyes were closed. Yet through those closed lids eyes glared! Plainly he saw them—eyes hard as jade, white-hot with wrath, glaring through the closed lids as though those lids had been gossamer!

And the slender crescent upon the woman's brows was radiant now as the young moon itself; and all about it the masses of red-gold hair beat and tossed, streaming like rack of racing storm, swirling like silken pennons in whirlwind of war. Round and round the shining crescent whirled the cloud of the doves; snowy wings beating, red beaks open; screaming.

Out of the blackness roared the thunder of the serpent drum.

"*Ai-ai-i!*" From the moon-crowned shape came a cry like the jubilant clamor of newly wakened winds of spring shouting over pine-crested billows of a thousand hills. Answering it, another roaring of the drum; sustained and menacing. The blackness thinned. A face stared out, half veiled; bodiless, floating in the shadow. It was the face of Klaneth—and yet no more his face than that which challenged it was the woman Sharane's. The pale eyes had become twin pools of white hell flames; pupilless. On his brow sat throned the ageless, ultimate evil. For a heart beat the face hovered, framed by the darkness. Then the shadow dropped over it; hid it.

Now Kenton saw that this shadow hung like a curtain at the line where black deck met ivory deck, and that he lay upon the latter hardly a yard distant from where that line cut the ship in twain. He saw, too, that the radiance from the orb struck against this curtain, and made upon it a great circle that was like a web of beams spun from the rays of a rosy moon; and that against this shining web the shadow pressed, striving to break through.

And suddenly from the black deck the thunder of the serpent

Virgil
O
Finlay

drum redoubled; the brazen conches shrieked. Drum thunder and shrieking horn blasts mingled and became one—the pulse of Abaddon, Lair of the Damned, throbbing in the voice of the Abyss. They fed the shadow, strengthened it; they were the rhythm of its will. Blacker, denser now, the shadow thrust against the web of light.

From Sharane's women, crouching low, shot storm of harpings, arpeggios like gusts of tiny arrows, and with them pipings from the double flutes that flew like shrill, swift javelins. Arrows and javelins of sound cut through the thunder hammer of the drum, the bellow of the horns; weakening them; beating them back.

A movement began within the shadow. It seethed. It—spawned!

Over all the face of the weblike disk of radiance black shapes swarmed. Their bodies were like monstrous larvæ, slug-shaped, faceless. They tore at the web with black talons, strove to thrust through it with hideous tentacles, flailed it with batlike wings.

The web gave!

Its edge held firm, but slowly, slowly, the center was pushed back until the disk was like the half of a huge, hollow sphere. Within that hollow crawled and writhed and struck the monstrous shapes.

From the hidden deck drum and brazen horns roared triumph!

Again rang the golden trumpet cry of the woman. Out of the orb poised upon the cabin streamed an incandescence intolerable. The edges of the radiant web shot forward, curved—and closed upon the black spawn. Within it they milled and struggled like fish in a net.

And like a net lifted by some mighty hand the closed web was swung up high above the ship with all its infernal burden. Its brightness grew to match that of the great orb, whose rays were now piercing the darkness at the stern; putting it to rout. With-

in it the shapes of blackness squirmed, shrank; dissolved! From them came a faint, high-pitched, obscene wailing.

They were gone!

The globular net that had been the shining web opened. Out of it drifted a little cloud of ebon dust!

The web hovered; streamed back to the orb that had sent it forth.

Then, swiftly, the orb—was gone!

Gone, too, was the darkness that had shrouded the deck of Klaneth!

High above the ship the doves of Ishtar wheeled in a vast ring, crying victory.

A hand touched Kenton's shoulder. He looked up—straight into the shadowy eyes of the woman called Sharane: no goddess now, but only lovely, alluring woman. In those eyes he read amazement, startled disbelief. He felt the delicious warmth of her; inhaled her fragrance.

Kenton sprang to his feet. Too late he remembered the blow that had ended his fall upon the ship. A thrust of blinding pain shot through his head. The deck whirled round him. He tried to master the giddiness; he could not. Dizzily the ship spun beneath his feet; and beyond in wider arcs spun turquoise sea and silver horizon.

Now they formed a vortex, a maelstrom, down whose pit he was dropping—faster, ever faster. Around him was a formless blur; again he heard the tumult of the tempests, the shrillings of the winds of space. He abandoned himself to headlong, prodigious flight.

The winds died away. He was standing, his flight over, on solidity once more. He heard three clear bell notes. He opened tight-closed eyes.

Kenton stood within his own room!

There by the window glimmered the jeweled ship.

The bell he had heard had been his clock, chiming the hour of six. Six o'clock! The last sound of his familiar world before the mystic sea had swept that world from under him had been the third stroke of that same hour, clipped off in mid-note. Why then—all he had seen, all his adventure, must have happened in half a clock chime!

Adventure? Had it been that? Or only a dream?

He lifted a hand and winced as it touched a throbbing bruise over his right temple. Well—that blow had been no dream! He stumbled over to the ship. He stared at it, incredulous. Then one by one he pulled at each of the manikins, each toy. Immovable, gem-hard, part of the deck itself each seemed to be as each had been before.

And yet— In half a clock chime those toys had moved, new toys appeared!

For now the long-armed beater of the serpent drum stood upright on the black deck, peering toward the platform at the right of the mast, one hand pointing, the other resting on the shoulder of a manikin in glittering mail.

Nor was there any woman at the rosy cabin's door as there had been when he had loosed the mystery from the block. Clustered around the threshold were five slim girl toys with javelin in hands.

And the woman was on the starboard platform, bent low beside the rail as though looking at some one lying there.

Looking where he had crouched while over him had waged the battle between the radiant orb and core of blackness!

And the ship's oars were no longer buried in the turquoise waves—they were lifted, poised for a downward stroke!

Chapter Four

AGAIN, ONE BY ONE, HE WENT OVER THEM—EACH TOY. HIS fingers lingered on the leaning woman; caressed her. No life was there, no warmth, no pulse—gem-hard, gem-cold, exquisite.

Only toys?

Then why, as his hand rested on the silver crescent upon her brows, did some gladness well up from unknown depths within him, banishing his amaze? A hot new life swept like a roaring wave through every vein. What was it that shouted within him, exultant—telling him that his commerce with this Ship of Ishtar had but begun?

Abruptly, he withdrew his hand; unhooked a silken hanging from the wall and threw it over the shining bark.

This done, he went to the bathroom and examined the bruise on his head. It was tender enough, but nothing serious. He might have fallen upon the floor of his room, he thought as he touched it, overcome by those strange perfumes.

But—he knew he had not!

An hour with cold compresses fairly well removed all out-

ward marks on it. At seven thirty he dined; and dined well. Wherever he was bound, he would be no worse for being well provisioned. That the ship would return for him he never for an instant doubted.

"You needn't bother about me any more tonight, Jevins," he told his man. "I've some writing to do—some very important work. If any one calls, tell them I'm away for the night. I'm going to lock myself in—and I don't want to be disturbed for anything less than Gabriel's trumpet."

Jevins, a heritage from Kenton's father, smiled.

"All right, Master John," he answered. "I'll not let anybody bother you."

"It's really important." Kenton rested a hand on the old man's shoulder. "I think—probably—it will be—well, the most important work of my life," he ended, whimsically.

And with what spirit of prophecy he did not then dream.

"Trust me, Master John," said old Jevins.

Kenton passed on to his bedroom, entirely satisfied. He would have no interruptions now. Jevins would see to that. He caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror and paused. Hardly the costume this, if he were going voyaging on the ship.

He stripped; then rummaged among some costumes he had brought home with him years ago from Persia. He picked out a silken vest, a silken and embroidered tunic; he slipped his arms through them. A pair of wide pantaloons with a broad blue woven girdle; he put them on. He thrust his feet in a pair of curved Turkish slippers.

His gaze fell upon an ancient cloak he had picked up in Mosul. It was very old, very beautiful. Untold centuries had softened its blue; through its azure web and woof great silvery serpents writhed, half hidden, cabalistically entwined.

He threw it over his shoulders; caught another glimpse of himself in the mirror and stared, astonished. Could this be he—

this youthful, adventurous Sultan, whose keen, dark face stared back at him? The blue and silver cloak made him seem taller than even his six feet warranted. There was a look of power about him, too—curious how subtly changed his face, his carriage!

Could it be the cloak?

The cloak!

That reminded him—there was a detail missing; the strange blade that had been wrapped in that same garment when he had bought it. He found the weapon; balanced it in his hand.

An odd enough weapon this, in truth! Silvery serpents twined about its hilt. At the end of that hilt gleamed a single blue gem, cabochon cut; not a sapphire; some jewel he did not know. Below the hilt was a strong rod of bronze eight inches in length and round as a staff. This staff flattened out into a lean-shaped, razor-edged sword blade, two feet long and full six inches at its greatest width; a blade oddly like the assagais of the Zulus. He thrust it into his girdle; felt now that he was fully dressed for his part.

He opened the bedroom door cautiously; listened. He slipped through and back to the room where the ship lay. Lifting its shroudings he drew one deep breath of wonder at its beauty; then turned off the electrics.

As his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness he caught a dim shimmering where the ship rested; faint reflections from the Avenue's lights penetrating the window hangings.

How silent the room had become!

It was filling with silence as a vessel fills with water!

Now a sound broke the stillness; the lapping of little waves; numerous, languorous, caressing. He realized that his eyes were closed; strove with all his might to open them. The lapping of the waves came closer. By an effort he half raised his lids.

There was a wide mist opposite him, a globular mist of silver drifting down upon him as though it were the curved breast of another world.

An impacting world?

No—an interpenetrating world!

Fleeting, incredibly swift, was that comprehension; in the infinitely small point of time it sparked through his mind he knew it for revelation; explanation; the only key to—the inexplicable.

By light of that spark Kenton saw the globe upon which he lived—not for what it seems, but for what it is—an etheric vibration—an etheric vibration between the intervals of whose pulsing pulsed the electrons of other interlaced worlds upon worlds; children of that primal force whose vibrations are matter in all the guises that we know—and that we do not know.

He visualized these worlds and his own as *congeries* of electrons, each in reality as wide apart as the planets from each other; as those same planets from the sun. He saw through the abysses of space between these specks myriads of similar *congeries* grouped into unseen, unseeable worlds; each world spinning, whirling, yet untouching and untouched by any other; interlaced; interlocked; interpenetrating.

Embracing worlds keyed to lower and to higher pitch than ours, and each in utter ignorance of the other embrace. Worlds moving through and about us. Worlds registering no more upon each other than do the thousands of wireless messages upon the receiver untuned to receive them. Worlds interfering with each other no more than do the dozen messages that, freed from contact with each other by their varying scales of vibration, pass simultaneously over a single wire.

On one of these interpenetrating worlds sailed this Ship of Ishtar.

The jeweled shape there was not the ship itself. It was the key that opened the door of Kenton's world into that of the ship's; the mechanism that attuned him to that other world's vibrations.

Swift came that revelation; swiftly it fled.

Through the silver mist the ship drifted down upon him, its oars motionless, its sail but half filled. Wavelets crisped at its sickled bow; wavelets of palest blue with fine laced edges of white foam. Half his room was lost now in the ripples of that approaching sea. The part of his room on which he stood and watched seemed to be many feet above those waves—so far below were they that the deck of the ship was level with his feet.

Closer drew the ship and as it drifted lazily on, Kenton drew further back from the waves rippling toward him as lazily.

He wondered why he heard no rushing winds, nor clamoring tempests.

No sound save the faint whispering of the lace tipped waves.

Now Kenton's back was against the wall of his room. Before him stretched the turquoise ocean, the ship seemingly not more than six feet away.

Kenton leaped—straight for the ship.

Winds roared about him now; winds vast as those that swirl within the unfathomable abyss the Norsemen called Ganunga-gap, within whose womb from mated fire and ice was born the giant whose skull was made the sky, and from whose flesh and bones was moulded earth. The vast winds roared and howled about him—yet again he felt them not.

Suddenly the vast winds were still. His feet struck solid surface. Gasping, he opened his eyes. He stood upon the ivoried deck facing the rosy cabin with its blossoming little trees and its flocks of crimson billed, vermilion footed doves.

Between him and the cabin's door stood a girl, her soft brown eyes filled with awe and wonder and that same startled disbelief that he had seen in the shadow-filled eyes of Sharane when her gaze had fallen upon him at the foot of the emerald mast.

Even through his whirling senses he knew that this girl was lovely. Her red mouth was open like a surprised child; her bluish black hair hung in soft ringlets over her white shoulders; silken

folds of filmy green fluttered about her, revealing curves too full for maidenhood. Yet her eyes were innocent and her voice almost childishly sweet as she spoke to him.

"Are you the Lord Nabu that you come thus out of the air and in his cloak of wisdom, his serpents twining within it?" she murmured. "Nay—that cannot be! For Nabu is very old and you are young! Are you his messenger?"

She dropped to her knees; crossed her hands, palms outward, over her forehead.

"I am not the Lord Nabu," Kenton heard himself say—and vaguely he wondered how he could so clearly understand her speech, answer it so readily. "Maybe I have been sent by him. I do not know."

But the girl had leaped to her feet; sprung to the closed door of the rosy temple.

"*Kadishtu!*" she struck softly upon it. "Holy One! My Lady Sharane—a messenger from our Lord Nabu."

Kenton turned and looked behind him. His glance traveled over the pit of the oarsmen. They seemed asleep, bare bodies bent over their oars, their heads bowed. The golden bearded warrior had vanished from the black deck, but the satyr priest of the serpent drum was there. Upon his ugly face was stamped stark and ludicrous amazement. The frog mouth lolled open; the little eyes protruded; one huge paw swung over the drum-head as though about to beat alarm. Kenton saw that the huge torso was balanced upon a pair of grotesquely bowed legs, short as the arms were long. Above the waist the drummer was a giant; below it a dwarf.

The black, deep-set eyes searched him—then the corners of the slit mouth lifted, the face creased into a thousand wrinkles. The drummer had smiled at him. The hovering paw drew away from the drum-head; waved a greeting, sardonic but reassuring, warning, too—for a long thumb thrust toward the black cabin.

The door of the rosy cabin was flung open. On its lintel stood the crescented woman of the red-gold hair, the woman named Sharane. Her eyes were full of wonder; an uncertain recognition within them, too. She looked beyond him to the drummer. He followed her glance. The drummer seemed to sleep.

"Watch, Satalu," she whispered to the girl.

She caught Kenton's hand; drew him swiftly, softly within the rosy cabin; closed the door behind them.

The cabin was surprisingly large; fragrant; filled with a rose pearl light. Two girls were there who stared at him with eyes filled with wonder; one was fair-haired, blue-eyed; the second black-tressed as the one without. The Lady Sharane dropped his hand, ran to them, thrust them toward the door.

"Out!" she cried. "Out and watch with Satalu. And gossip not together of this, lest Gigi wake and hear you and the Black Worm be warned."

The pair slipped from the cabin. Sharane flew to another door; opened it. Kenton caught a glimpse of another cabin and in it other girls as lovely as those who had gone, and as startled as they. He saw javelins leaning against a wall, racks of arrows, great bows, short swords. Only a glimpse of these he had, for with one short whispered command Sharane closed this door; locked it.

She stood, regarding Kenton. She came close, looked deep into his eyes, measured his tall body. She stretched out slim fingers; with them touched his eyes, his mouth, his neck—as though to assure herself that he was real. At her touch strange thrillings ran through him.

Desire swift and flaming!

She cupped his hands in hers and bowed and set her brows against his wrists; the waves of her hair bathed them. They were silken strands of nets to which his heart flew like a bird eager to be trapped. He steadied himself; he drew his hands from hers,

roughly; braced himself against her lure. She lifted her head; regarded him.

"What has the Lord Nabu to say to me through his messenger?" The mellow voice rocked Kenton with perilous sweetnesses, subtle provocations. "Is the strife to end? What is your word to me, messenger? Surely will I listen—for in his wisdom has not the Lord of Wisdom sent one to whom to listen is not—difficult?"

There was a flash of coquetry in the misty eyes turned for an instant to his—like the flirt of a roguish fan. Still thrilling to her closeness, groping for some firm ground upon which to stand in this unfamiliar world, Kenton sought for words.

Desperately, playing for time, he looked about the cabined space.

THE SIN OF ZARPANIT

Chapter Five

THERE WAS AN ALTAR AT THE FAR END OF THE ROSY CABIN. It was sown with luminous gems, with pearls and pale moonstones and curdled, milky crystals. From seven crystal basins before it seven little silver pale flames sprang. There was an alcove behind the altar, but the glare of the seven flames hid what might be within. Yet he had a swift sense of tenancy of that veiled alcove. Something dwelt within it; something living, but —yes, that was it—asleep! At the side was a low, wide divan of ivory inlaid with the milky crystals, patterned with golden arabesques. Silken tapestries fell from the walls, multi-colored, flower woven. Soft, deep silken rugs covered the cabin's floor; and piles of cushions. At right, at left, low windows opened; through them streamed silver light. A bird flew upon the sill of one, a white bird with vermilion beak and feet and eyes of ruby. It scanned him; it preened itself; it cooed and flew away—

A dove of Ishtar!

Soft hands touched his. He gazed into the lovely face of the Lady Sharane, into eyes shadowed now with doubt.

"You are—Nabu's messenger?" she asked. In the hardened voice he read suspicion, a rising anger—no ghost of fear. "Messenger you must be—" her voice was very low, more as though her thought found tongue than that she spoke to him. "Else how could you board the ship? But Messenger of Nabu—or messenger of—"

Her eyes suddenly blazed upon him—

"Nabu or—Nergal?"

"Lady of all loveliness!" Kenton's tongue was loosed. "It may be that I am a messenger. But how sent, by whom sent—it may be that I know no more than you; except this—that it was never by command of the Lord of the Dead that I came!"

"You do not know!" she cried. "And yet if you came not from the Lord Nabu, why are you clad in his cloak and why carry you his sword? Many, many times have I seen them both in his shrine at Uruk— I am weary of the ship," she whispered. "I would see Uruk and Babylon again! Ah, dearly, dearly do I long for Babylon!" Her voice deepened, mournfully. A tiny chill ran through Kenton.

"Lady," he said. "In one way at least I am a messenger of Nabu. As you say, he is the Lord of Truth. I will speak only truth to you. Yet before you learn more of me, this must you do—tell me the story of this ship; how it came to sail upon this strange sea; and—where have vanished the Lady Zarpanit and that Alusar whom she loved."

She shrank to the edge of the divan; fear enough now in her eyes.

"All that you must know," she whispered. "If you know of—of them—you must know *all*. I do not understand—"

"Sharane," he said, "it matters not at all whether you understand, nor whether your tale be twice told! I must hear it and from you! After that *I* will speak and *you* shall listen."

She looked at him, doubtfully; searching the clear blue eyes

bent steadily upon her. Then sank back upon the divan and beckoned him beside her. She drew close, laid a hand lightly upon his breast.

He felt his heart leap under the touch; she felt it, too, and moved a little from him, smiling; watching him through downcast, curving lashes. She drew her slender, sandaled feet beneath her; sat musing for a space, white hands clasped between rounded knees, eyes filled with dream. When she spoke her voice was low, her words half intoned.

"The sin of Zarpanit; the tale of her sin against Ishtar, Ishtar the Mighty; Mother of the Gods and of Men, Lady of the Heavens and of Earth—who loved her—even as daughter!"

She paused; and Kenton had an eerie thought that what had lain sleeping behind the seven altar lights had wakened and was listening; was listening and watching him; weighing him; measuring him! He had a sense of peril, of trespass within forbidden places, of trembling balances in which rested his destiny. For a heart beat unearthly fear shook him.

Sharane's soft shoulder touched him—fear was forgotten in eyes' delight of her exquisiteness, the sweet sorceries of her! And as his fear fled he knew that the beat of that pulse had swung the balance for him; that he had been measured.

For good or for ill he had been weighed by the hidden dweller in the candled shrine!

"High Priestess of Ishtar at her Great House in Uruk was Zarpanit." Sharane's eyes were veiled, her head bent. "*Kadishtu*, Holy One, was she. And I, Sharane, who came from Babylon, was next to her; her priestess; loved by her as she was loved by Ishtar. Through Zarpanit the Goddess counseled and warned, rewarded and punished, kings and men. In Zarpanit the Goddess became incorporate; dwelling in the house of her soul as in a temple; seeing through her eyes; speaking through her lips—so greatly did Ishtar love her!

"Now the temple in which we dwelt was named the House of the Seven Zones. In it was the Temple of Sin; God of Gods, who dwells in the Moon; of Shamash his son whose home is the Sun; of Nabu the Lord of Wisdom; of Ninib, the Lord of War; and of Nergal the Dark One, the Hornless, ruler of the dead; and of Bel Merodach, the mighty lord. But most of all was it the House of Ishtar, who by her sufferance let these others—all save Bel, who dwelt there of his own right—temple themselves within her holy home.

"From Cuthaw in the north, from the temple there which Dark Nergal ruled even as Ishtar ruled at Uruk, came a priest to sit over the Zone of Nergal in the House of the Seven Zones. His name was Alusar—and close as was Zarpanit to Ishtar, as close was he to the Lord of the Dead. Nergal made himself manifest through Alusar; spoke through him and dwelt at times within him even as did Ishtar within her Priestess Zarpanit. With Alusar came a retinue of priests and among them that black worm, that spawn of Nergal's slime—Klaneth. And Klaneth was close to Alusar as I to Zarpanit—"

She raised her head, looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"I know you now," she cried. "A little while ago you lay upon the ship and watched my strife with Klaneth! Now I know you—although then you were not dressed as now—and you vanished as I looked upon you!"

Kenton smiled at her.

"You lay with frightened face," she said, "and stared at me through fearful eyes—and fled!"

Renewed suspicion rippled through the words. But over Kenton a sudden hot anger swept.

"Your eyes lied to you then!" he said. "It was no fault of mine that I fled. I, who returned as quickly as I could. Nor ever think again that my eyes will hold *fear* of you!" He gripped her hand, drew her close. "Look into them!" he bade her.

She looked—long; sighed and bent away; sighed once more and swayed toward him, languorously. His arms flew round her. She thrust him away.

"Enough!" she said. "I read no hasty script in new eyes. Yet I retract—you were not fearful! You fled not! Let be!"

Wholly withdrawn, gaze turned from him, she brooded.

"Between Ishtar and Nergal," Sharane took up the interrupted tale, "is and ever must be unending strife and hatred. For Ishtar is Bestower of Life and Nergal is the Taker of Life, the King of Death; she is the Lover of Righteousness, and he is the Father of Evil. And how shall ever heaven and hell be linked; or life and death; or good and evil?

"Yet she," the voice deepened, "Zarpanit, *Kadishtu*, the Holy One of Ishtar, her best beloved, did link all of these. Where she should have turned away—she looked with desire; where she should have hated—she loved!

"Yea—the Priestess of the Lady of the Heavens loved Alusar, Priest of the Lord of Death! Her love was a strong flame in whose light she could see only him—and him only. Had Zarpanit been the Lady Ishtar she would have gone to the Dwelling Place of the Lost for Alusar, even as did the goddess for her lover Tammuz—to draw him forth or to dwell there with him. Yea, even to dwell with him there in the cold darkness where the dead creep feebly, calling with the weak voices of birds. In the cold of Nergal's abode, in the famine of Nergal's domain, in the blackness of his city where the deepest shade of earth would be a ray of sun, Zarpanit would have been happy—knowing that she was with Alusar.

"So greatly did she love!"

Was there a stirring behind the pale altar flames? He strove to see; turned his gaze back to the Lady Sharane. If there had been movement she had not heeded it.

"I helped her in her love—for love of her," she whispered. "But Klaneth, the Black Worm, crawled ever behind Alusar

waiting for chance to betray and to creep into his place; yet Alusar trusted him. There came a night—"

She paused, the eyes that had been soft, tear-filled, were shadowed with memoried fear.

"There came a night when Alusar had crept to Zarpanit within her chamber. His arms were about her, hers around his neck; their lips together.

"Klaneth, I thought, watched at the outer door. I lay at the threshold of the inner—watching."

Her eyes widened, her lips whitened, the whole lithe body quivered.

"And that night down came the Goddess Ishtar from her heavens to Zarpanit, entered and possessed her! And at that same instant from his dark city came Nergal and passed into Alusar!

"And in each other's arms, looking into each other's eyes, caught in the might of mortal love were heaven and hell! The Soul of Life and the Soul of Death!"

She shuddered and was silent and long moments crept by before again she spoke.

"Straightway those two mortal lovers who clasped were torn from each other. We were buffeted as by hurricanes; blinded by lightnings; thrown broken to the walls. And when we knew consciousness once more the priests and priestesses of the Seven Zones had us. All the sin was known! Yea, even though Ishtar and Nergal had not met that night still would the sin of Zarpanit and Alusar have been known—for Klaneth, whom we thought on guard had betrayed them, and crawled away and had brought down upon us the pack!

"Let Klaneth be cursed!" Sharane raised arms high, and the pulse of her hate lifted Kenton's heart like a rushing wave. "Let Klaneth crawl blind and undying in the cold blackness of Nergal's abode! But Goddess Ishtar! Wrathful Ishtar! Give him to me first that I may send him there as I would have him go!"

Chapter Six

HER TENSE ARMS DROPPED SLOWLY; HER LOVELY FACE GREW still.

"For a time," she said, "we lay in darkness, Zarpanit and I together—and Alusar far away. Great had been the sin of those two, and in it I had shared. Not quickly was our punishment to be decided. I comforted her as best I might, loving her, caring naught for myself—for her heart was close to breaking, knowing not what they were doing with him she loved.

"There fell another night when the priests came to us. They drew us from our cell and bore us in silence to the portal of the *Du-azzaga,* the Brilliant Chamber, the Council Room of the Gods. There stood other priests with Alusar. They opened the portal, fearfully, and they thrust us three in.

"Now, indeed, my spirit shrank and was afraid, wailing out within me; and beside me I felt the shuddering soul of Zarpanit!

"For the *Du-azzaga* was filled with light and in the places of the Gods sat not their priests, but—the Gods themselves! Hidden each behind a sparkling cloud the Gods sat and watched us

through their veils. In the place of Nergal was a fiery darkness.

"Through the blue shining mist before the shrine of Nabu came the voice of the Lord of Wisdom.

" 'So great is thy sin, O Zarpanit, and thine, O Alusar,' it said, 'that it has troubled even us, the Gods! Now what have ye to say before we punish?'

"The voice of Nabu was cold and clear as the light of the far-flung stars, passionless as the wind that streams between the worlds—yet in it was understanding.

"And suddenly my love for Zarpanit soared up like a flame and I held fast to it and it gave me strength. And beside me I felt her soul stand erect, defiant, her love flinging itself around it like a flaming garment. She answered not—only held out her arms to Alusar. I looked at him and his love, too, stood forth unafraid even as hers. He sprang to her, clasped her in his arms.

"Their lips met, and the judging gods were forgotten!

"Then the God Nabu, peering out through his blue, shining mist, spoke again.

" 'These two bear a flame that even we may not destroy!'

"At this the Lady Zarpanit drew from her lover's arms; came close to the pulsing glory that shrouded Ishtar; did homage; clear-eyed, unafraid, addressed her:

" 'You, O mother, are you not the mother of that fire we call love? Did you not create it and set it as a torch above Chaos? And, having made it, did you not know how mighty was the thing you made? It was that love of which you are the mother, O Holy Ishtar, that entered me—that came unsought into this temple of my body which was yours and still is yours though you have abandoned it. Is it *my* sin that so strong was love that it opened the doors of your temple; that its light blinded me to all save him on whom it shone? *You* are the creator of love. Why made you it so mighty? And if love be grown stronger than you who made it, O Ishtar, can we—a woman and a man—be blamed

that we could not conquer it? And if love be not stronger than you, still did you make it stronger than man. Therefore punish love, your child, O Mother—not us!'

"She ceased; and Alusar drew her to him, saying:

" 'Man may not accuse the gods, who gave him being—yet the flame you made to forge on life's anvil gods and man is a strong flame, O Mother Ishtar! Also it comes to me who stands here to be judged that there is a justice which even the gods must heed—or in time cease to be. Now in the name of that justice I speak! To that justice I appeal! I ask no mercy—if we have sinned we must suffer. If you, O Ishtar, could destroy in Zarpanit that flame of love for me, wipe out all memory of me from her, I would pray that on *me* alone be set the burden of suffering. But that even you cannot do—and so each single arrow point of my agony would be tenscore thrust in her! Nay—if we have sinned we have sinned together, and together we must pay. And that in the name of the eternal justice which rules even you, I demand, O Ishtar.'

"It was the Lord Nabu who broke the silence of the gods.

" 'They who are to be judged, accuse,' he said. 'And truth is in what they say. They carry a flame, I tell you, which even we may not destroy. The fire they bear is one whose ways, O Ishtar, you know better than do I. Also it is you who are the accuser and you who are the accused. Therefore, Ishtar, it is for you to speak.'

"From the glory veiling the goddess a voice came; sweet but small with bitter anger.

" 'There *is* truth in what you say, Zarpanit, whom once I called daughter! Now because of that truth I will temper my anger. You have asked me whether love is stronger than Ishtar, its mother. We shall learn! This is your doom: that you and the man Alusar dwell in a certain place that shall be opened to you. Ever together shall you be—even as he has demanded. You shall

look upon each other, yet never shall you touch hands or lips. You may speak each to the other, but not of this fire of love! For when that flame leaps and draws you together then I, Ishtar, will come to you, Zarpanit, and fight with love. It will not be the Ishtar you have known who shall come. Nay, that Sister-Self of mine whom men call the Destroyer, the Wrathful—*she* shall possess you. And so it shall be until the flame within you conquers her, or that flame perishes for weariness!'

"The voice of Ishtar was still; the gods were silent. Then out of the blackness of the shrine of Nergal bellowed the voice of the Lord of Death.

" 'So say you, Ishtar! Then I, Nergal, tell you this. I stand with this man who is my priest; nor am I so much displeased with him, since it was by him that I looked so closely into your eyes, O Mother of the Heavens!' The dark cloud shook with a hideous laughter. 'I shall be with him, and I will meet you, Ishtar the Destroyer! Yea, with craft to match yours and might to grapple with you—until I, not you, have destroyed this woman and the flame she boasts, as well as that within this priest of mine. For in my abode there are no such flames—and I would quench it in him that my darkness be not affrighted when my priest at last comes to me!'

"And again the laughter shook the ebon cloud, while the glory that covered Ishtar quivered with wrath. But the three of us listened with despair—for ill as it was with us, far, far more ill was it to hear this jesting with the Dark Hornless One with the Mother of the Heavens!

"Came the goddess's voice—bitter, smaller still:

" 'Be it so, O Nergal!'

"There was silence for a little time among the gods; and I thought that behind their veils they looked at each other askance. Came at last the passionless voice of Nabu:

" 'What of this woman Sharane—'

"The voice of Ishtar, impatient:

" 'Let her fate be bound with Zarpanit's. Let Zarpanit have her retinue in that place to which she goes.'

"Then Nabu, again:

" 'And the priest Klaneth—is *he* to go free?'

" 'What! Shall not my priest have his retinue, too?' mocked Nergal. 'Set Klaneth beside my priest Alusar with others to minister to him.'

"Again I thought that the gods looked askance at each other. Then Nabu asked:

" 'Shall it be so, Queen of the Heavens?'

"And Ishtar answered:

" 'Let it be so!'

"The *Du-azzaga* faded; I was one with the nothingness."

Chapter Seven

AGAIN SHARANE WAS SILENT, BROODING, HE KNEW, OVER PICtures of a world that lay six thousand years deep in the abyss of time, yet still fresh and living to her. Silent, too, sat Kenton, fighting against belief in this strange tale of strife between angry god and goddess made incarnate in priestess and priest. She stirred, laid hand on his.

"When we awoke we were on this haunted ship, on this strange sea, in this strange world, messenger," she said. "Yea, and all that the gods had promised and decreed in the *Du-azzaga* had come to pass. For with Zarpanit was I and half a score of the temple girls she had loved. And with Alusar was Klaneth and a pack of his black acolytes. They had given us oarsmen, sturdy temple slaves—a twain for each oar. They had made the ship beautiful, and they had seen to it that we lacked nothing."

A green flame of anger pulsed for an instant through her eyes.

"Yea," she said, "the kindly gods did all for our comfort—and then they launched the ship on this strange sea in this strange world as battleground for Love and Hate, arena for Wrathful

Ishtar and Dark Nergal, torture chamber for their sinning priestess and priest.

"It was in this cabin that Zarpanit awakened—with the name of Alusar upon her lips. Then straightway ran she out the door as though she knew where he were, and, as she sped out, from the black cabin came Alusar calling her name. I saw her reach that line where black deck meets this—and, lo, she was hurled back as though by thrust of strong arms. For there is a barrier there, messenger—a barrier built by the gods over which none of us upon the ship may pass. But then we knew nothing of that. And Alusar, striving to pass that unseen wall, too, was hurled back from it.

"Then as they arose, calling, stretching hands, striving to touch finger to finger, straightway into Zarpanit poured that Sister-Self of Ishtar, the Angry One, the Destroyer. While around Alusar black shadows deepened and hid him. At last they parted—and what had been the face of Alusar was the face of Nergal, Lord of the Dead!

"Yea. So it was—even as the gods had decreed. And that immortal twain within the bodies of those mortal two who loved each other so—battled and flung their hates like brands against each other. While the slaves chained to their oars in the pit cowered and raved or fell senseless under the terrors loosed above them. And the temple girls with us cast themselves upon the deck or ran screaming into the cabin that they might not see. Only I did not cry out or flee—I who, since I had faced the gods in the *Du-azzaga*, could never again feel fear.

"And"—she drew a deep breath, eyes misty with sorrow—"so it fared; how long, how long I do not know, in this place where time seems not to be, since there is neither night nor day as we knew them in Babylon.

"Yet ever the priest and priestess strove to meet, and ever Wrathful Ishtar and Dark Nergal thrust them apart. Many are

the wiles of the Lord of the Shades, and countless are his weapons. And many are the arts of Ishtar, and is not her quiver always full? Messenger, how long the pair endured, I know not. Yet always strove they to break that barrier through, driven by their love. And always—"

She covered her face; her white shoulders shook with her weeping.

"The flames within them burned on," she whispered. "Nergal nor Ishtar could dim them. Their love did but grow stronger. There came a day—"

For a little she faltered, then went on:

"It was in mid-battle. Ishtar had taken possession of Zarpanit and stood where this deck touches the pit of the oarsmen. Nergal had poured himself into Alusar and hurled his evil spawn across the pit against the goddess's lightnings.

"And as I crouched, watching, at this cabin's door, suddenly I saw the radiance that covered Ishtar tremble and dull. For an instant I thought I saw the face of Ishtar waver and fade—the face of Zarpanit look out from where the face of Ishtar had been.

"While the darkness that shrouded the Lord of the Dead lightened—as though a strong flame had shot up within it!

"Then Ishtar took one step—and another and another—toward the barrier between black deck and this. But it came to me that not by her will did she so move. No! She went haltingly, reluctantly, as though something stronger than herself pushed her on. And as she moved, so moved Nergal within his shadows to meet her!

"Closer they came and closer. And ever the radiance of Ishtar would wax and wane. Ever the shadows clothing Nergal would lighten, darken, lighten again. Yet ever—slowly, unwillingly, but inexorably—they drew closer and closer to each other. Now

I could see the face of Alusar, the priest, thrusting itself into sight, stripping itself of Nergal's mask.

"And suddenly, with fast beating heart, it came to me that Wrathful Ishtar and the Dark One were no longer striving against each other. But that she, the goddess, was at grips with the flame in Zarpanit! And that he, the Lord of the Dead, was battling with the flame within the priest—those flames that Nabu had said not even the gods could destroy!

"Slowly, slowly the white feet of Zarpanit carried Ishtar to the barrier; and slowly, slowly, ever matching her tread, came Alusar to meet her. And they met! They touched hands, touched lips, clasped—ere conquered god and goddess could withdraw from them!

"They kissed and clasped. They fell upon the deck—dead. Dead—in each other's arms. They died, messenger, when their lips touched!

"There was a burst of light like the stroke of a thousand lightning bolts. The ship shook and shuddered.

"But before that burst of light came I thought I saw two shining flames rise from their bodies, hover for a heart beat, rush to each other, merge—and vanish.

"Nor Ishtar nor Nergal had conquered! Nay! Love of man and love of woman—these had conquered. Victors over god and goddess—the flames were free!

"The priest had fallen on the hither side of the barrier. We did not unclasp their arms. We bound their bodies round with silken, perfumed coverings. We set them adrift, alock, face to face—their bodies.

"Then ran I forth to slay Klaneth. But I had forgotten that neither Ishtar nor Nergal had conquered one the other. Lo, into me as I ran poured the goddess, and into Klaneth returned Nergal! As of old these two powers battled! And again the unseen

barrier was strong as of old, holding back from each other those in ivory deck and black.

"Yet I was happy—for by this I knew that Zarpanit and Alusar had already been forgotten by them. It came to me that the strife had gone beyond those two who had escaped. That now it mattered not either to Wrathful Ishtar or to Nergal that they had gone—since in my body and in Klaneth's they could still strive against each other for possession of the ship.

"You see, messenger?" Her eyes searched him. "Also it came to me that so long as I might keep—them—at strife, that much longer might Zarpanit and Alusar have to find hiding place from them. Find sanctuary in some far-flung world beyond the outermost strand of stars.

"And so I dared the black priest often—and often was I the phial for Ishtar. And so we sail—and fight. And sail—and fight.

"How long, I do not know. Once I knew time. Here there is nothing of that time I knew in my own world. No time here—on these strange seas, in this strange world. Many, many years must have passed since we faced the gods in Uruk—but see, I am still as young as then and as fair! Or so my mirror tells me," she sighed.

Chapter Eight

KENTON SAT SILENT, UNANSWERING, THE DEPTHS OF HIS SOUL troubled. Young and fair she was indeed—and Uruk and Babylon mounds of time-worn sands these thousands of years. What *could* he say to her—what message could *he* have for her who, if her story were true, ought by every law of nature, in which he believed, be but dust within the wind-driven dust of her crumpled temple?

And yet—she was not dust!

She was here before him, living, palpitant, clothed in beauty!

"Tell me, lord"—her voice roused him; her face was dreamy, the long lashes downcast—"tell me, my lord, has the Temple at Uruk great honor among the nations still? And is Babylon still proud in her supremacy?"

He did not speak, belief that he had been thrust into some alien, incredible reality wrestling with outraged revolt of the modern, skeptic part of him. What! Believe this tale of an angry goddess and god, creatures of human fancy whose fanes were but moldering ruins on the highway of the ages, whose very names were well-nigh forgotten? Give credence to this?

Nevertheless, the woman was real, living; she must be answered! Against each other strained the opposing currents of his thought.

And the Lady Sharane, raising her eyes to his troubled face, stared at him with ever growing doubt. Suddenly she leaped from beside him, stood quivering like a blade of wrath in a sweetly flowered sheath.

"Have you word for me?" she cried. "Speak—and quickly!"

What could he answer?

Dream woman or woman in ancient sorceries, there was but one answer for Sharane—the truth.

"But you *are* from Nabu," she breathed. "You must be. How else could you have come—and wrapped in his blue cloak of wisdom and his serpents?"

"Listen," he answered. "Listen until I am done—"

And tell her the truth Kenton did, beginning from the arrival of the block from Babylon into his house; glossing no detail that might make all plain to her. She listened, her gaze steadfast upon him, drinking in his words—amazement alternating with stark disbelief; and these in turn by horror, by despair.

"For even the site of ancient Uruk is well-nigh lost," he ended. "The House of the Seven Zones is a wind-swept heap of desert sand. And Babylon, mighty Babylon, has been level with the wastes these six thousand of years!"

She leaped to her feet—leaped and rushed upon him, eyes blazing, red-gold hair streaming.

"Liar!" she shrieked. "Liar! Now I know you—you phantom of Nergal!"

A dagger flashed in her hand; he caught the wrist just in time; struggled with her; bore her down upon the couch.

"I tell you the truth!" he cried. "I know no Nergal—nor Ishtar—nor Nabu! I am a man—and I have told you truth!"

Abruptly she relaxed, hung half fainting in his arms.

"Uruk dust!" she whimpered. "The House of Ishtar dust! Babylon a desert! And Sargon of Akkad dead six thousand years ago, you said—six thousand years!" She shuddered, sprang from his embrace. "But if that is so, then what am I?" she whispered, white lipped. "What am—I? Six thousand years and more gone since I was born—and I alive! Then what *am* I?"

Panic overpowered her; her eyes dulled; she clutched at the cushions. Through Kenton's mind flashed a cynic thought. This woman who could talk so calmly of commerce with gods, of their vengeance and their strife, accepting what to him was the unbelievable—this woman to be appalled by age, overwhelmed by that purely natural fact of the passing of time! It was this paradox that made her real. He had known a woman who could look at hurricane and earthquake without a tremor, but who cowered and wept at the approach of a birthday! In Uruk or Babylon or New York—the breed held true!

Pity awoke within him. He took a step toward her. She looked up at him; the pale lips still quivering, the slim fingers twitching at the silken nets over her breast. He bent over her; she threw white arms around him.

"I am alive?" she cried. "I am—human. I am—woman?"

Her soft lips clung to his, supplicating; the perfumed tent of her hair covered him; the fragrance of her body rocked him. She held him, her lithe body pressed tight, imperatively desperate. Against his racing heart he felt the frightened pulse of hers beating through the rounded bosom. And ever between her kisses she whispered: "Am I not a woman—and alive? Tell me—am I not alive?"

Desire filled him; he gave her kiss for kiss; yet tempering the flame of his desire was clear recognition that neither swift love for him nor passion had swept her into his arms.

It was terror that lay behind her caresses. She was *afraid*—appalled by that six-thousand-year wide abyss between the life

she had known and his! Clinging to him, she fought for assurance of her own reality. Seeking such an assurance, she had driven back to woman's last intrenchment, the primal assertion of the woman-self—the certainty of her womanhood and its unconquerable lure.

No, it was not to convince him that her kisses burned his lips—it was to convince *herself*.

He did not care. She was in his arms. He gave her kiss for kiss.

She thrust him from her; sprang to her feet; faced him.

"I am a woman, then?" she cried triumphantly. "A woman—and alive?"

"A woman!" he answered thickly, his whole body quivering toward her. "Alive! God—yes!"

She closed her eyes; a great sigh shook her—a sigh that was almost a sob.

"And that is truth," she cried, the Lady Sharane. "And it is the one truth you have spoken. Nay—be silent!" she checked him. "If I am woman and alive, it follows that all else you have told me are lies—since I could be neither were Babylon dust and it six thousand years since first I saw the ship. You lying dog!" she shrilled, and with one ringed hand struck Kenton across the lips.

The rings cut deep. As he fell back, dazed both by blow and sudden shift of fortune, she threw open the door of that other cabin in which he had glimpsed the clustered girls.

"Luarda! Athnal! All!" wrathfully she summoned them. "Quick! Bind me this dog! Bind him—but slay him not!"

Streamed from the cabin seven warrior maids, short kirtled, bare to their waists, in their hands light javelins. They flung themselves upon him. And as they wound about him Sharane darted in, tore the sword of Nabu from his hand.

And now young, fragrant bodies crushed him in rings of woman flesh, soft, yet inexorable as steel. The blue cloak was

thrown over his head, twisted around his neck. At the strangling grip Kenton awoke from his stupor—awoke roaring with rage. Savagely he tore himself loose, hurled the cloak from him, leaped toward Sharane. Quicker than he, the lithe bodies of the warrior maids screened her from his rush. They thrust him with their javelins, pricking him as do the matadors to turn a charging bull. Back and back they drove him, ripping his clothing, bringing blood now here, now there.

Through his torment he heard the laughter of Sharane.

"Liar!" she mocked. "Liar, coward, and fool. Tool of Nergal, sent to me with a lying tale to sap my courage! Well—witless one, I'll send you back to Nergal with another tale to tell him!"

Back and back he was driven. The warrior maids dropped their javelins, surged forward as one. They clung to him; twined legs and arms around him; dragged him down. Cursing, biting, flailing with his fists, kicking—caring no longer that they were women—Kenton fought them. Berserk, he staggered to his feet, the girls clinging like hounds to a stag, seeking his throat, his eyes. His foot struck the lintel of the rosy cabin's door. Down he plunged, dragging his wildcat burden with him. Falling, they drove against the door. Open it flew, and out through it they rolled, writhing, battling down the ivoried deck.

There was a shouting close behind him, a shrill cry of warning from Sharane. Some urgent command, for grip of arms and legs relaxed; clutching, clawing hands were withdrawn.

Sobbing with rage, Kenton swung to his feet. And as he swung upright, he saw that he was almost astride the line that was the mysterious, deadly barrier between ivoried deck and black. Dimly it came to him that this was why Sharane had whistled her furies from him; that he had dragged them too close to its menace.

Again her laughter racked him. She stood upon the gallery of

little blossoming trees, her doves winging about her. The sword of Nabu was in her hand; derisively she lifted it.

"Ho, lying messenger!" mocked Sharane. "Ho, dog beaten by women! Come get your sword!"

"I'll come, damn you!" he shouted, and leaped forward.

The ship pitched. Thrown off his balance, Kenton staggered back, reeled to the line where black and ivory decks met.

Reeled over it—unhurt!

Something far deeper than his consciousness registered that fact; registered it as of paramount importance. Whatever the power of the barrier, to it Kenton was immune. He poised himself to leap back to the ivory deck.

"Stop him!" came the voice of Klaneth.

In mid-spring long, sinewy fingers gripped his shoulder, swung him round. He looked into the face of the beater of the serpent drum. Staring at him with amazement and a curious awakening speculation in his beady black eyes, the drummer's talons lifted him and cast him like a puppy behind.

And panting like some outraged puppy, Kenton swayed upon his feet and looked around him. A ring of black-robed men was closing in upon him, black-robed men whose faces were dead white, impassive; black-robed men closing in upon him with clutching hands. Beyond the ring stood the mailed warrior with the golden beard and the pale agate eyes; and beside him Klaneth.

Naught cared Kenton for any or all of them.

"Stop me—hell!" he roared.

He rushed the black robes. They curled over him, overwhelmed him, pinned him down.

Again the ship lurched, this time more violently. Kenton, swept off his feet, slid sidewise. A wave swished over him, half strangling him. The hands that clutched him were washed away by it. Choking, he threshed hands and feet, striving to stand. Another wave lifted him, flung him up and out. Like a leaf over

a cataract he felt himself falling into the sea. Deep he sank. He fought his way upward, thrust his head at last above the surface. He dashed the water from his eyes; looked for the ship.

A roaring wind had risen, and under it the ship was scudding —a hundred yards away. He shouted; swam toward her. The wind roared louder; down went the sail; down dipped the oars straining to keep the ship before the wind. Faster and faster flew the ship before the blast—was lost in the silvery mist.

Kenton ceased his efforts; floated, abandoned in an unknown world.

A wave smote him; he came up behind it, choking. The wind was shrieking, roaring, overhead. The spindrift whipped him. He heard the booming of surf, the hiss of combers thrown back by ramparts of rock. Another wave caught him, swept him forward. Struggling upon its crest, he saw just ahead of him a pinnacle of yellow stone rising from a nest of immense bowlders upon which the billows broke in fountains of spume. Again a wave seized him, hurled him on; he fought against it helplessly.

His strength left him; he let himself go; stopped fighting. He felt himself lifted by a gigantic comber; dashed straight against the yellow pillar.

The shock of his impact was no greater than that of breaking through thick cobweb! For infinite distances, it seemed, he rushed on and on through a soft, thick darkness. With him went the sound of waves. Abruptly, his motion ceased; the sound of the waves fled. He was gripping something—something hard and smooth; not rock, no—wood.

Suddenly he knew he was within his own room.

He snapped on the electrics; stood swaying, shuddering. What was that upon the floor at his feet? Stupidly he stared. It was water—water that was dripping from him, forming a pool. Water—water strangely colored; strangely colored water—crimsoned water.

He realized that he was wet to the skin; drenched. He licked lips gone abruptly dry—there was salt upon them!

And the water that dripped from him was crimsoned, crimsoned—crimsoned with his blood!

There was a long mirror in this room of his. He stumbled to it. Stumbling to meet him came a drenched and ragged figure. Ripped and tattered was its clothing, water dripped from it and from a score of wounds blood mixed with that water mingled and dripped.

It was—himself!

He turned to where the ship gleamed; bent over it. On the black deck was a group of the little figures, leaning, looking over the rail.

Upon the gallery of the rosy cabin one tiny figure stood.

Sharane!

He touched her.

Jewel hard, jewel cold, a toy—yet Sharane!

Sharane, beautiful, palpitant, terrified, wrathful, vengeful, mocking—Sharane!

This toy was—she!

Like a returning wave, his berserk rage against her swept him. Echoes of her laughter in his ears, Kenton, cursing, sought for something with which he could shatter that shining bark of beauty, break the link it formed between Sharane's ensorcelled world and his own.

Never again should she laugh at him—mock him!

He caught a heavy chair by its legs, swung it high overhead, poised for an instant to send it crashing down upon the ship—

And suddenly beneath the salt upon his lips Kenton tasted the honey musk of her kisses—the kisses of Sharane!

The chair dropped from his hands.

"Ishtar! Nabu!" he whispered, arms held high in supplication. "I call upon you. Set me once more upon the ship. Whatever the

price, that price I will pay. Ishtar! Do with me as you will—only set me again upon your ship!"

Swift was his answer. He heard far off a bellowing roar as of countless combers battering against a rock-ribbed coast. Louder it grew. Then with a thunder of vast waters the outward wall of his room dissolved.

Where wall had been was the crest of one tremendous wave. And that wave curled down over Kenton, rolled him far under it, shot him at last gasping for breath up and up through it.

He was afloat again upon the turquoise sea!

He thrust himself high above the waters. The ship was close! Close? Its scimitared bow was striking down by his head; was flying past him. A golden chain hung from it, skittering over the crests. Kenton clutched at it—missed it.

Back he fell. Swift raced the shining side of the ship past him. Again he threw himself high. There was another chain; a black one spattering over the wave tips and hanging from the stern.

He gripped it. The sea tore at his thighs, his legs, his feet. Grimly he held fast. Hand over hand, cautiously, he drew himself up; scaled the side of the ship. Now he was just below the rail. Slowly he raised his head to peer over.

Long arms swept down upon him; long hands gripped his shoulders, lifted him, hurled him down upon the deck, pinned him there. He felt a thong drawn round his ankles, his arms pinioned to his sides. He looked into the face of the frog-mouthed beater of the serpent drum.

And over one of the drummer's enormous shoulders stared the white face of Klaneth. He heard his voice:

"Carry him in, Gigi."

And the answer of the drummer, indifferent.

"As you will it, Klaneth."

He felt himself lifted by the drummer as easily as though he had been a babe; and cradled in his huge hands he was carried through the black cabin's door.

Chapter Nine

THE DRUMMER SET KENTON ON HIS FEET, REGARDING HIM with curious, half-amused eyes. Agate eyes of the red bearded warrior and pale eyes of Klaneth dwelt upon him as curiously. But in the last was no amusement. No!

As curiously Kenton took stock of the three. First the black priest—massive, elephant thewed; flesh sallow and dead as though the blood flowed through veins too deeply imbedded to reveal the creep of its slow tide; the vulture nose and merciless lips; the feral phosphorescence glimmering behind the wan pupils; the face of Nero remodelled from cold clay by numbed hands of sluggish god within some frozen hell. Heavy; plastic with evil—but not that hot evil which often touching life is absorbed within and transformed by life's fire. The evil in Klaneth's face was a cold evil and one with death. And as unalterable as death.

Then Gigi—the drummer. His froglike face with the pointed, jet hung ears; his stunted and bowed legs; his giant's body above the hips; the gigantic shoulders whence swung the long and

sinewy and apish arms whose strength Kenton had felt; the slit of a mouth in whose corners a malicious humor dwelt. Something of old earth gods about him; a touch of Pan; more than a touch of Satyr.

Red beard—a Persian out of that time when Persia's hordes were to the world what later the Roman legions were to be. Or so Kenton judged him by his tunic of linked light mail, the silken sheathed legs, the high buskins and the curved daggers and the scimitar in his jeweled belt. And human as Kenton himself. About him was none of the charnel flavor of Klaneth nor the goat rankness of Gigi. The full red lips beneath the carefully trimmed beard were sensual, life loving; the body burly and muscular; the face whiter than Kenton's own. But it was sullen and stamped deep with a half-resigned, half-desperate boredom that even his lively and frank curiosity about Kenton lightened but little.

They said nothing; only stood there measuring him; and each, so it seemed to Kenton, with different purpose. He turned his eyes from them; looked about him.

In front of him was a wide slab of bloodstone. Six priests knelt upon it, worshiping something that stood within a niche just above the slab. What it was he could not tell—except that it breathed out evil. A little larger than a man, the thing within the niche was black and formless as though made of curdling shadows. It quivered, pulsated—as though the shadows that were its substance thickened constantly about it, passed within it, were replaced swiftly by others.

Dark was that cabin, the walls somber as dull black marble. Other shadows clung to those dark walls and clustered in the corners; subtle, sinister shadows that seemed only to await command to deepen into substance. Unholy shadows—like those that clothed the evil thing within the niche.

Beyond, as in the cabin of Sharane, was another chamber,

and crowding at the door between, glaring out at him, were a dozen or more of the black robed, white faced priests.

"Go to your places." Klaneth turned to them, breaking the silence. They slipped away. The black priest closed the door upon them. He touched the nearest of the kneeling priests with his foot.

"Our Lord Nergal has had enough of worship," he said. "See—he has swallowed your prayers!"

Kenton looked at the thing within the niche. It was no longer misty, shadowed. It stood out, clear cut. Its body was that of a man and its face was that same awesome visage of evil into which he had seen the black priest's turn on that first adventure of his upon the ship.

The face of Nergal—Lord of the Dead!

What had been the curdled, quivering shades enveloping the statue? What was it Klaneth had said—that Nergal had *swallowed* their prayers? Had the shadows really been that—the prayers of the priests? Black prayers, evil prayers, streaming out of the minds of the priests like black mists, shrouding the image, passing into it? *Swallowed* by it!

He felt the eyes of Klaneth searching him, covertly. A trick! A trick to frighten him. He met the black priest's gaze squarely; smiled.

The Persian laughed.

"Hai, Klaneth," he said. "There was a bolt that fell far short. Mayhap the stranger has seen such things before. Mayhap he is a sorcerer himself and can do better things. Change your play, Klaneth, change your play."

He yawned and seated himself upon a low settle. The black priest's face grew grimmer.

"Best be silent, Zubran," he said. "Else it may be that our Lord Nergal will change his play for you in a way to banish forever your disbelief."

"Disbelief?" echoed the Persian. "Oh, Nergal is real enough. It is not disbelief that irks me. It is the eternal monotony. Can you do nothing new, Klaneth? Can Nergal do nothing new? Change his play for me, eh? By Ahriman—that is just what I wish he would do, if he can!"

He yawned again, ostentatiously. The black priest growled; turned to the six worshipers.

"Go," he ordered, "and send Zachel to me."

They filed through the outer door. The black priest dropped upon another settle, studying Kenton somberly; the drummer squatted, also watching him; the Persian muttered to himself, playing with his dagger hilts. The door opened again and into the cabin stepped a priest who held in one hand a long whip whose snaky lash, metal tipped, was curled many times around his forearm. He bowed low before Klaneth.

"The slaves sleep?" asked the black priest.

"They sleep, master," answered he called Zachel. And now Kenton recognized him. When he had lain on the deck close to the mast he had seen this man sitting on a high platform at the foot of that mast. Overseer of the galley slaves, the oarsmen, was Zachel, and that long lash measured to flick the furtherest of them if they lagged.

"Is this he whom you saw upon the deck some sleeps ago when our Lord Nergal poured into me?" asked Klaneth. "He who lay there and, you say, vanished even as that cursed drab of Ishtar yonder bent over to touch him?"

"He is the same, master," answered the overseer, coming close to Kenton and scanning him. "He was not dressed the same as now—but he is the same."

"Where went he then?" asked Klaneth, more to himself than to the other. "To the drab's cabin? But if so—why did she drive him out, her cats clawing him? And whence came this garb he

wears—and the sword she waved and bade him come retake? I know that sword—"

"He went not into her cabin at that time, master," said Zachel. "I saw her seek for him. She went back to her place alone. He had—vanished."

"And his driving forth," mused Klaneth, "that was two sleeps ago. And the ship has sailed far since then. We saw him struggling in the waves far behind us. Yet here he is upon the ship again—and with the wound those temple furies gave him still fresh, still bleeding as though it had been but a moment gone. And how passed he the barrier? Yea—how passed he the barrier?"

"Ah, at last you have stumbled on a real question, Klaneth," cried the Persian. "Let him but tell me that, let him but teach me that—and, by the Nine Hells, not long would I sit in this company."

Kenton saw the drummer make a swift and warning gesture to Zubran, saw the black priest's eyes narrow menacingly, his face grow grim, indeed.

"Ho! ho!" laughed Gigi. "Zubran but jests, Klaneth. Would he not find life there as tiresome as he pretends to find it with us? Is it not so, Zubran?"

Again he made the fleet, warning sign. And the Persian heeded it.

"Yes, I suppose that is so," he answered, grudgingly. "At any rate—am I not sworn to Nergal? Nevertheless," he muttered, "the gods gave women one art that has not grown tiresome since first they made the world."

"They lose that art in Nergal's abode," said the black priest, grimly. "There is no loving there, Zubran. Best remember that and curb that tongue of yours lest you find yourself in a worse place than here—where at least you have your body."

"May I speak, master?" asked Zachel; and Kenton felt malignancy, threat, in the glance the overseer shot at him.

The black priest nodded.

"I think he passed the barrier because he knows naught of our Lord," said Zachel. "Indeed—may be an enemy of our Lord. If not—why was he able to shake off the hands of your priests, vanish in the sea—and return?"

"Enemy of Nergal!" Klaneth started.

"But it does not follow that he is friend of Ishtar," put in the drummer, smoothly. "True if he were sworn to the Dark One he could not pass the barrier. But true it is also that were he sworn to Ishtar equally would that have been impossible."

"True!" Klaneth's face cleared. "And I know that sword. Nabu's own blade."

He was silent for a moment; thoughtful. When he spoke there was courtesy in the thick voice.

"Stranger," he said, "if we have used you roughly, forgive us. Visitors are rare upon this ship. You—let me say—startled us out of our manners. Zachel, loose his bonds."

The overseer bent and sullenly set Kenton free of his thongs.

"If, as I think, you came from Nabu," went on the black priest, "I tell you that I have no quarrel with the Wise One or his people. Nor is my Master, the Lord of Death, ever at odds with the Lord of Wisdom. How could he be when one carries the keys of knowledge of this life, and the other the key that unlocks the door of the ultimate knowledge? Nay, there is no quarrel there. Are you a favored one of Nabu? Did he set you on the ship? And—why?"

Silent was Kenton, searching desperately for some way to answer the black priest. Temporize with him as he had with Sharane, he knew he could not. Nor, he knew, was it of any use to tell him the truth as he had to her—and been driven out like

a hunted rat for it. Here was danger; peril, greater than he had faced in the rosy cabin. Klaneth's voice cut in:

"But favored of Nabu as you may be, that could not save you from losing your sword nor from the javelin of the women. And if that is so—can it save you from my whips, my chains? And worse?"

And as Kenton stood, still silent, the wolf light flared in the dead pupils and the black priest leaped to his feet crying:

"Answer me!"

"Answer the Lord Klaneth!" roared Gigi. "Has fear of him killed your tongue?"

Under the apparent anger of the drummer's voice Kenton sensed a warning; friendliness. And Gigi had not told of his second appearance on the ivory deck, his entering of Sharane's cabin. Why?

"If that favor could have saved me, at least it did not," he said.

The black priest dropped back upon the settle, chuckling.

"Nor I think could it save you if I decreed your death," he said.

"Death—if he decrees it," croaked Gigi.

"Whoever you are," went on the black priest, "whence you come, or how—one thing is sure. You have power to break a chain that irks me. Nay, Zachel, stay," he spoke to the overseer who had made a move to go. "Your counsel is also good. Stay!"

"There is a slave dead at the oars," said the overseer. "I would loose his chains and cast him over."

"Dead?" There was new interest in Klaneth's voice. "Which was he? How died he?"

"Who knows?" Zachel shrugged his shoulders. "Of weariness, maybe. He was one of those who first set sail with us. He who sat beside the yellow haired slave from the North that we bought at Emakhtila."

"Well—he has served long," said the black priest. "Nergal hath

him. Let his body bear his chains a little longer. Stay with me."

He spoke again to Kenton, deliberately, finally.

"Bearer of Nabu's sword," he said. "I offer you freedom. I offer you riches and power. I will give you honors and wealth in Emakhtila whence we shall sail as soon as you have done my bidding. There you shall have priesthood and a temple if you so desire. Gold and women and rank—if you will do what I desire. And if you will not—then torture such as few men have known. And long, oh very long after that—death."

"What is your desire that will win me all this?" asked Kenton.

The black priest arose and bent his head so that his eyes looked straight into Kenton's own.

"Slay Sharane!" he said.

Slay Sharane? Slay Sharane! And despite her wrath—her kisses still sweet on his lips! The thought shook him to the depths of his being. He steadied; cast about for something that would let him play for time.

"Little meat in that plan, Klaneth," the Persian spoke, mockingly. "Did you not see her girls beat him? As well send to conquer a lioness a man who has already been conquered by her cubs."

"Nay," said Klaneth, "I meant not for him to pass over the open deck where surely her watchers would see him. He can clamber round the ship's hull—from chain to chain, ledge to ledge. Or we can still the oars, drop the sail, becalm the ship. Then he can slip down into the water, swim silently to the bow. There is a window behind the cabin wherein she sleeps. Up to it and through it he can creep—"

"Best swear him to Nergal before he takes that road, master," Zachel interrupted. "Else we may never have him back again."

"Fool!" Gigi spoke. "If he makes his vows to Nergal perhaps he cannot go at all. For how know we that then the barrier will

not be closed to him as it is to us who are sworn to the Dark One, even as it is to those who are sworn to Ishtar?"

"True," nodded the black priest. "We dare not risk that. Well spoken, Gigi."

In Kenton's mind a plan had begun to form.

"Why should she be slain?" he asked. "Let me take her for slave that I may repay her for her mockery and her blows. Give her to me—and you may keep all the riches and honors you have offered. So greatly do I hate her!"

"No!" The black priest leaned closer, searching more intently the eyes of Kenton. "She must be slain. While she lives the Goddess has a vial into which to pour herself. Sharane dead—Ishtar has none on this ship through whom she may make herself manifest. This, I, Klaneth, know. Sharane dead—Nergal rules. Through me! Nergal wins. Through me!"

In Kenton's mind the plan had formed. He would promise to do this—to slay Sharane. He would creep into her cabin, tell her of the plot. Some way, some how, make her believe him. And then he would take the sword, creep back the way he had come and slay Klaneth. But—could he do this? A sudden doubt touched him as he looked at the bulk of the black priest, the three others. And then—there were the black robed pack. Could he, alone, meet all these? Slay Klaneth?

The doubt fled. Something whispered that neither Gigi nor the Persian would fight against him; that there was some secret understanding between those two—some deep hatred of the black priest. Else why the drummer's covert warning to Zubran? And why the peculiar protection for himself that he had sensed in Gigi during all this encounter? Why—again—Gigi's silence to Klaneth on Kenton's second sailing on the ship? Was the beater of the serpent drum tired as Zubran of life on the black deck? Eager to see Klaneth overcome? Yet by vows the strength of

which he could not understand made powerless to harm the black priest?

Too late he saw by the black priest's face that something of all this had been revealed in his own—that Klaneth had caught his thought! Too late remembered that the sharp, malignant eyes of the overseer had been watching him, losing no fleeting change of expression; interpreting!

"Look, master!" Zachel snarled. "Look! Can you not read his thought, even as I? See what it is he plans? You have held me here for counsel and have called my counsel good—then let me speak what is in my mind. I thought that he had vanished from beside the mast, even as I told you. But did he? The gods come and go upon the ship as they will. But no man does! We thought we saw him struggling in the waves far behind the ship. But did we? By sorcery he may have made us see that which in reality was not! Upon the ship he must have lain all this while, hid in Sharane's cabin. Out of her cabin we saw him come—"

"But driven forth by her women, Zachel," broke in the drummer. "Cast out. Beaten. Remember that. There was no friendship there, Klaneth. They were at his throat like hounds tearing down a deer."

"A play!" cried Zachel. "A play to trick you, master. They could have killed him. Why did they not? Why his wounds are but pin pricks. They drove him, yes. But over to us! Sharane knew he could cross the barrier, even as now do you. Would she have made gift to us of new strength unless—she had a purpose? And what could that purpose have been, master? Only one. To place him here to slay you—even as you now plan to send him to slay her!

"He is a strong man—and lets himself be beaten by girls! He had a sword, a sharp blade and a holy one—and he lets a woman take it!

"Ho! Ho!" laughed Zachel. "Do *you* believe all this, master? Well—*I* do not!"

"By Nergal!" Klaneth swore, dead face livid, eyes aflame with witch light. "Now by Nergal—!"

Suddenly he gripped Kenton by the shoulders, hurled him through the cabin door and out upon the deck. Swiftly he followed him; set heavy foot upon Kenton's breast.

"Sharane!" he howled. "Sharane!"

Kenton raised his head, dizzily; saw her standing beside the cabin door, arms around the slim waists of two of her damsels.

"Well—toad?" she called.

"Nergal and Ishtar are busy elsewhere," he mocked. "Life on the ship grows dull. There is a slave under my feet. A lying slave. Do you know him, Sharane?"

He bent and lifted Kenton high, as a man a child. Her face, cold, contemptuous, did not change.

"He is nothing to me—worm," she answered. "I drove him forth. To you, where he belongs. Do as you will with your own. It is nothing to me."

Beneath her stillness the black priest must have seen something hidden to Kenton, for the dead eyes brightened, the lips curled with cruel delight. He dropped Kenton roughly to the deck.

"Nothing to you, eh?" roared Klaneth. "Yet it was by your will that he came to me. Well—he has a lying tongue, Sharane. By the old law of the slaves shall he be punished for it. I will pit four of my men against him. If he master them I shall keep him for awhile—to amuse us further. But if they master him—then shall his lying tongue be torn from him. And I will give it to you as a token of my love—O Sacred Vessel of Ishtar!

"Ho! Ho!" laughed the black priest as Sharane shrank, paling. "A test for your sorceries, Sharane. To make that tongue speak! Make it—" the thick voice purred—"make it whisper of love to you. Tell you how beautiful you are, Sharane. How wonderful—

ah, sweet Sharane! Reproach you a little, too, perhaps for sending it to me to be torn out!

"Ho! Ho!" laughed Klaneth; then as though he spat the words —"You temple slut!"

He thrust a light whip in Kenton's hands.

"Now fight, slave!" he snarled, "fight for your lying tongue!"

Four of the priests leaped forward, drawing from beneath their robes thongs tipped with metal. They circled, and before Kenton could gather his strength, could realize how menaced, they were upon him. They darted about him like four lank wolves; slashing at him with their whips. Blows flailed upon his head, his naked shoulders. Awkwardly he tried to parry, to return them. The metal tips bit deep. From shoulders, chest, back, a slow rain of blood began to drip.

A thong caught him across the face, half blinding him.

Far away, he heard the golden voice of Sharane, shrill with scorn.

"Slave—can you not even fight!"

Cursing, he dropped his useless whip. Close before him was the grinning face of the priest who had struck him. Ere his lash could be raised again the fist of Kenton had smashed squarely on the leering mouth. He felt beneath his knuckles the bones of the nose crumble, the teeth shatter. The priest crashed back; went rolling to the rail.

Instantly the other three were upon him; tearing at his throat, clawing him, striving to drag him down. He broke loose. The three held back for an instant; then rushed. One there was a little in front of the others. Kenton caught him by an arm, twisted that arm over his shoulder, set hip to prisoned flank, heaved and hurled the priest through air against the pair poised to strike. Out flung the body; fell short. The head crashed against the deck. There was a sharp snap, like a breaking faggot. For a moment the body stood shoulders touching deck, legs

writhing as though in grotesque mid-somersault. Then crumpled and lay still.

"Well thrown!" he heard the Persian shout. "There is one who will never use lash again!"

Long fingers clutched his ankles; his feet flew from beneath him. As he fell he caught glimpse of a face staring up at him, a face that was but one red smear; the face of the first priest he had battered down and who, recovering, had crept along the deck and thrown him. Falling, Kenton swept out his arms. They clutched one of the two against whom he had hurled that priest who now lay dead, neck broken. They dragged him down.

He whom Kenton had caught writhed, twisted and clutched his throat. With the strangling grip there flashed into his mind a dreadful thing he had seen done in another unequal combat upon a battlefield in France. Up swept his right hand, the first two fingers extended. They found place in the eye sockets of the throttler; pressed there cruelly; pressed there relentlessly. He heard a howl of agony; tears of blood spurted over his hands; the choking fingers dropped from his throat. Where eyes had been were now two raw red sockets with dreadful pendants hanging glaring down beneath each.

Kenton leaped to his feet. He stamped upon the crimson smeared face looking up at him. Stamped once, twice, thrice—and the grip about his ankles was gone.

He caught a glimpse of Sharane, white faced, wide eyed; realized that the laughter of the black priest was stilled.

At him rushed the fourth acolyte, a broad-leafed knife gleaming in his grip. Kenton bent his head, rushed to meet him. He caught the hand that held the blade; bent the arm back; heard the bone snap. The fourth priest shrieked and fell.

He saw Klaneth, mouth loose, staring at him.

Straight for the black priest's throat he leaped, right fist swinging upward to the jaw as he sprang. But the black priest

thrust out his arms, caught him in mid-leap. Then lifted him high over his head; balanced him there to dash him down upon the deck. Kenton closed his eyes—this, then, was the end.

Came the voice of the Persian, urgent, agonized.

"Hai, Klaneth! Hai! Kill him not! It is long since I have seen such a fight! By Ishak of the Hollow Hell—kill him not, Klaneth! Save him to fight again!"

Then the drummer—

"Nay, Klaneth! Nay!" He felt the talons of Gigi catch him; hold him tight in double grasp. "Nay, Klaneth! He fought fairly and well. He would be a rare one to have with us. Mayhap he will change his mind—with discipline. Remember, Klaneth—he is the only one of us who can pass the barrier."

The great bulk of the black priest trembled. Slowly his hands began to lower Kenton.

"Discipline? Ha!" It was the snarling voice of the overseer. "Give him to me, master, in the place of the slave who died at the oar. I will teach him—discipline."

The black priest dropped Kenton on the deck; stood over him for a moment. Then he nodded, turned abruptly, and stalked into his cabin. Kenton, reaction seizing him, huddled; hands clasping knees.

"Unchain the dead slave and cast him over, Zachel," he heard Gigi say. "I will watch this man till you return."

Kenton heard the overseer patter away. The drummer bent over him.

"Well fought, wolf cub," he whispered. "Well fought! Now to your chains. Obey. Your chance shall come. Do as I say, wolf cub—and I will do what I may."

He walked away. Kenton, wondering, raised his head. He saw the drummer stoop, lift the body of the priest with the broken neck and with one sweep of his long arm send it whirling over the ship's rail. Bending again he sent after it the body of him

upon whose face Kenton had stamped. He paused speculatively before the wailing, empty socketed horror stumbling and falling about the deck. Then, grinning cheerfully, he lifted it by the knees and tossed it overboard.

"Three less to worry about hereafter," muttered Gigi.

A tremor shook Kenton; his teeth chattered; he sobbed. The drummer looked down on him with amused wonder.

"You fought well, wolf cub," he said. "Then why do you now quiver like a whipped hound whose half chewed bone has been cast away?"

He laid both hands on Kenton's bleeding shoulders. Under their touch he steadied. It was as though through Gigi's hands flowed some current of cold strength of which his soul drank. As though he had tapped some ancient spring, some still pool of archaic indifference both to life and death, the cold current ran through him.

And never again, although then he knew it not, was Kenton to feel for either life or death that respect or fear which, in his own world, were their legitimate shadows. All that he then realized was that whatever weakness of spirit within him there had been—was gone. Gone, too, all remorse, all shrinking from his brutalities.

In its place welled reckless will to conquer this ship!

Become its master!

Conquer Klaneth and his Dark God!

Conquer—

Sharane!

"Good!" said Gigi, and stood up. "Forget not. Now Zachel comes for you."

The overseer was beside him; touched his shoulder; pointed down a short flight of steps that led from the black deck to the galley-pit. Zachel behind him, he groped down those steps into the half darkness of the pit. He stumbled along a narrow pas-

sageway; was brought to halt at a great oar over whose shank bent from white, muscle-gnarled shoulders a head, golden haired, long haired, as any woman's. This golden haired oarsman slept. Around his waist was a thick bronze ring. From this ring a strong chain swung, its end fastened to a staple sunk deep in the back of the bench on which he sat. His wrists were manacled. The oar on which his head rested was manacled, too. Between manacled wrists and manacled oar two other strong chains stretched.

There was an empty chained circlet at the sleeper's left side; on the oar at his left two empty manacles hung from chains.

Zachel pushed Kenton down on the bench beside the sleeping, golden haired oarsman; swiftly and deftly girdled his waist with the empty bronze circlet; snapped it close; locked it.

He thrust Kenton's unresisting hands through the manacles dangling from the oar; closed them on him; locked them.

The golden haired giant never moved; slept on upon his hands, head bent over the oar.

And suddenly Kenton felt warmth of eyes upon him; looked behind him; saw leaning over the rail the face of Sharane! There was pity in her face; wonder, too; and dawning of something that set his heart to beating wildly.

"I'll discipline you—never fear!" said Zachel.

Kenton looked behind him again.

Sharane was gone.

He bent over his oar beside the sleeping giant.

Bent over his oar—

Chained to it!

Slave of the ship!

UNDER THE LASH OF ZACHEL

Chapter Ten

KENTON AWAKENED TO THE SHRILLING OF A WHISTLE. SOMEthing flicked his shoulder like the touch of a hot iron. He jerked his head up from the bed of his arms; looked stupidly at the chained wrists. Again the flick upon the shoulder, biting hotly into the flesh.

"Up, slave!" he heard a snarling voice say—a voice he knew and struggled with deep drugged mind to place. "Up! Stand to your oar!"

Then another voice, close behind him, whispering, hoarse, but with warmth of comradeship in it:

"On your feet ere his whip covers your back with the blood runes."

He struggled upright; hands falling mechanically into two smooth, worn hollows in the wooden shaft to which he was chained. Standing thus upon the bench, his eyes looked out upon a tranquil, turquoise ocean, waveless, within a huge inverted bowl of silver mists. In front of him were four men, two standing, two sitting, at shanks of great oars which, like that he

clutched, thrust through the side of a ship. Beyond them sloped a black deck—

Memory rushed upon him, banishing the last of sleep. The first voice had been that of Zachel, and the hot touches on his skin the bite of his whip. He turned his head. A score of other men, black and brown, sat and stood at other great sweeps, bending and rising, sending the Ship of Ishtar cutting through the still blue sea. And there on a platform at the mast step was Zachel, grinning evilly. Out at Kenton flicked the long lash once more, this time drawing blood.

"Look not back! Row!" snarled Zachel.

"I will row," whispered the second voice. "Stand and sway with the oar till strength comes back to you."

He looked down on a head fair haired, long haired, as any woman's. But there was nothing womanish in the face that was lifted for an instant to his. Ice cold and ice blue were the eyes in it, though thawed now by a rough kindliness. The skin was storm beaten, tempest tanned. From left temple to point of chin ran a deep red scar, written there by sword. Nor was there aught womanish in the muscles that swelled on shoulders, back, and arms as he swung the great sweep, handling it as easily as a woman a broom.

Norseman from tip to toe. A Viking straight out of some ancient Saga—and, like Kenton, a slave to the ship. The giant who had bent asleep over the oar when Kenton's own chains had been locked upon him before that heavy slumber, whose coming he could not even now remember, had submerged him.

"Sigurd, Trygg's son, I," muttered the Norseman. "What Norn of ill-luck set you on this ship of warlocks? Speak low—bend to your oar. The devil with the lash has sharp ears."

To the motion of the oar Kenton bent and rose, standing there on the bench, his chains rustling. The odd benumbment that had held his mind was passing; passed ever more swiftly as his tight-

ened grip on the oar began to send the blood more swiftly through his veins. The rower beside him grunted approval.

"No weakling, you," he whispered. "The oar wearies—yet up it flows strength from the sea. But sip that strength slowly. Grow strong—slowly. Then it may be that you and I together—"

He paused; shot a wary side glance at Kenton, as though the thought had come to him that he were going too fast.

"By your looks, you are a man of the Eirnn, the Southern Isles," he whispered. "No grudge bear I against them. Viking, they met us always sword to sword and breast to breast. Many the blows we have struck between us, and the Valkyries hovering went never empty-handed back to Valhalla when we met the men of Eirnn. Brave men, strong men, men who died shouting, kissing sword blade and spear point as gayly as a bride. Are you one of these?"

Kenton thought swiftly. Cunningly must he shape his answer to bind this comradeship so plainly offered him; neither bewilder by whole truth nor be so vague as to rouse suspicion.

"Kenton, my name," he answered softly. "My fathers were of the Eirnn. Well knew they the Vikings and their ships—nor have they handed down to me any grudge against them. I would be friend of yours, Sigurd, Trygg's son, since for how long neither of us know I must labor here beside you. And since you and I—together—"

He paused meaningly, as had the Viking. The Norseman nodded, then again shot the keen side glance at him.

"Not yet, man whose fathers were of the Eirnn, have you told me how this bane fell on you," he muttered. "Since they drove me aboard this ship at Isle of Sorcerers no harbor have we entered. You were not here when they chained me to the oar. Yet—here are you! How?"

"Sigurd—by Odin All-Father—I do not know!" The Norseman's hands quivered at the name of his god. "An eye that I

could not see looked upon me. A hand that I could not see plucked me out of my own land and set me here. That son of Hela who rules the black deck offered me freedom—if I would do a thing of shame. I would not. I battled with his men. Three I slew. And then they chained me to this oar."

"You slew three!" The Viking looked up at Kenton, eyes blazing, teeth bared. "You slew three! Skoal! Comrade! Skoal!" he shouted.

Something like a flying serpent hissed by Kenton; hissed and struck the Norseman's back. It withdrew, blood spurting from where it had bitten. It struck and struck again.

The whip of Zachel, the overseer. His voice snarled through the hissing of the lash:

"Dog! Sow spittle! Have you gone mad? Shall I flay you then!"

Under the lash the body of Sigurd, Trygg's son, shuddered; from deep in his throat came a low, sobbing moaning. He looked up at Kenton, bloody froth on his lips. Suddenly Kenton knew that it was not from the pain of the blows that the Viking shuddered and sobbed—that it was from the shame of them and from rage; that the whiplash was drawing redder drops from the heart and the courage of him; threatening to break both.

And Kenton, leaning over, thrust his own bare back between that lash and the bloody shoulders; took the blows himself.

"Ha!" snarled Zachel. "You want them, do you? Jealous of my whip's kisses, are you? Well, then—take your fill of them!"

Mercilessly the lash hissed and struck, hissed and struck. Kenton endured its bite stoically, never shifting the shield of his body from the Norseman; meeting each sharp agony by thought of what he would do to repay them when his time had come—

When he had mastered the ship!

Abruptly the hailing blows ceased.

"Stop!" Through pain-misted eyes he saw the drummer lean-

ing over the pit. "Would you kill the slave, Zachel? By Nergal, if you do, I shall ask Klaneth as gift to me to chain you to that oar for a while!"

Then Zachel, sullenly:

"Row, slave!"

Silently, half fainting, Kenton bent over the oar. The Norseman caught a hand, held it in iron grip.

"Sigurd, Trygg's son, am I! Jarl's grandson! Master of Dragons!" His voice was low, yet in it was a clanginglike echo of distant, smiting swords; and he spoke with eyes closed as though he stood before some altar. "Blood brotherhood is there now between us, Kenton of the Eirnn. Blood brothers—you and I. By the red runes upon your back written there when you thrust it between me and the whip! By every drop of that blood are we brothers. And I shall be your shield as you have been mine. Our swords shall be as one sword. Your friend shall be my friend, and your enemy my enemy. And my life for yours when need be! This by Odin All-Father and by all the Æsir I swear—I, Sigurd, the Viking! And if ever I break faith with you, then may I lie under the poison of Hela's snakes until Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life, withers, and Ragnarok, the Night of the Gods, has come!"

Chapter Eleven

THE HEART OF KENTON SWELLED, GREW WARM; HIS SCOURGED back was forgotten in the glow that followed the Viking's vow. Chained to his oar, Sigurd might be even as he, and as helpless under the lash; but still—a friend here in the galley-pit. And once the two were loosed, a mighty friend indeed, a blood brother worth the having. This Master of Dragons, as he had called himself, and by that phrase Kenton knew he meant captain of war fleets of the old Norse galleys, should command the Ship of Ishtar—under him, of course.

Thus Kenton decided, letting no doubt of future victory assail him.

Now he was but a slave with whip-torn back and chained to an oar. That did not matter; he would conquer!

Against him were the black priest, the dread power he served, and his score of acolytes. Nor knew he, actually, when it came to grips with Klaneth, whether the drummer Gigi, for all his apparent friendliness, and the Persian Zubran, would not, bound by vows, give their strength to his enemies. Still, it did not matter. He would conquer!

And Sharane and her fighting women—them, too, would he conquer! What mattered the odds against him of men and women with their Nergal and their Ishtar? Burned steady within him unquenchable conviction that one day he would conquer the ship.

Master—Sharane!

The Viking's hand still gripped his. He placed his other hand upon it.

"Sigurd," he said, "blood brothers you and I from now on. Glad is my heart because of it. In ill luck and fair luck, in peace and in war, my fortune shall be your fortune and your bane my bane until the Norn who cuts the thread of life severs mine. Skoal, blood brother! Skoal! And may Odin All-Father give us strength to take this ship and sail it as we will!"

The grip of the Viking tightened. He withdrew his hand and bent once more to the oar. Nothing said he—but Kenton knew the vow was sealed.

The whip of the overseer cracked, a shrill whistle sounded. The four rowers in front lifted high their oars, shunted them into a niche. The Viking raised his sweep, set it in a similar rest.

"Sit," he said. "They wash us now and feed."

A cascade of water fell over Kenton, and another. The salt of it stung his wounds, brought tears to his eyes.

"Quiet!" warned Sigurd. "Soon the pain passes, and the salt will heal."

Then down over him too swished the water. Two brown men, naked to the waists, backs scarred, went by. In each hand they held buckets, raised them, and poured the water over two of the men at the stroke oars. They turned and went back along the narrow way between the benches. Powerful were their bodies. Their faces were those of men come to life out of some ancient Assyrian frieze, narrow, hook-nosed, full-lipped. No mind dwelt behind those faces. Their eyes were staring, empty. They

moved like automatons. An irrepressible tremor shook Kenton; the Viking noted it.

"Their souls are gone," he whispered. "They have long been gone. They are like the slave who died beside me. They have been so long upon the ship that it has sucked their souls from them. They are all like that, save two black men behind us. By the Æsir," he swore, "it was what I feared for myself until you came!"

Back the pair came with other buckets, which they dashed over the other two oarsmen. Bucket after bucket they emptied over the floor of the pit, washing it clean. And when this was done two other slaves set upon the bench between Kenton and the Norseman a rough platter and a bowl. On the platter were a dozen long pods and a heap of round cakes resembling the cassava bread the tropical folk press out and bake in the sun. The bowl was filled with a dark, thick liquid, purplish red.

He munched the pods; they were fleshy, with a curious meaty flavor. The round cakes tasted exactly like what they resembled —cassava bread. The liquid was strong, pungent, a trace of fermentation in it. There was strength in that food and drink. As he ate, Kenton felt strength rising in him. And the dousing had done him good. His back had ceased to smart, the wounds no longer throbbed. He relaxed. The Norseman smiled at him.

"No lash now, so we speak not too loudly," he said. "It is the rule. So while we eat and drink ask what you will of me without fear, blood brother."

"Two things I would first know of many," said Kenton. "How came you on the ship, Sigurd? And how comes this food here?"

"From here and there comes the food," answered the Viking. "It is a ship of warlocks and a cursed one. Not long may it stop at any place, nor at any place is it welcome. Nay, not even at Emakhtila, which is full of warlocks. Where it harbors they bring food and gear quickly and with fear. Quickly do they give

to speed it quickly away, lest the demons who possess it grow angry and destroy. They have strong magic—that pale son of Hela and the woman on the white deck. Sometimes I think her a daughter of Loki, whom Odin chained for his wickedness. And sometimes I think her a daughter of Freya, the Mother of Gods. But whatever she be, she is very fair and has a great soul. I have no hatred toward her."

He lifted the bowl to his lips.

"And as for how I came here," he went on, "that is a short tale enough. Southward I had sailed with the ships of Hagnor and Red Spear. Twelve great dragons had we when we set forth. Southward sailed we through many seas, raiding as we went. Then after long, with six of our twelve dragons left us, we came to the land of the Egyptians, to a city named Alexandria. It was a very great city and full of temples to all the gods in the world —except our gods.

"It irked us that among all these temples Odin All-Father had none. It irked us, and we grew wroth. So one night when we had drunk overdeep of the Egyptian wine six of us set forth to take a temple, cast out its god, and give it to Odin for a home.

"We came to a temple and entered. It was a dark temple and full of black robes like these on board the ship. When we told them what we meant to do, they buzzed like bees and rushed us like a wolfpack. Many then we slew, shouting. And we would have won that temple for Odin, the six of us fighting in a ring, but—a horn blew!"

"Summoning too many for you?" asked Kenton.

"Not at all, blood brother," said Sigurd. "It was a warlock horn. A horn of sleep. It blew sleep through us as the storm wind blows the spray through a sail. It turned our bones to water, and our red swords dropped from hands that could no longer feel their hilts. And down we all dropped, sodden with sleep, among the slain.

"When we awoke we were in a temple. We thought it the same temple, for it was as dark and the same black-robed priests filled it. We were in chains, and they whipped us and made us slaves. Then we found we were no longer in the land of the Egyptians, but in a city named Emakhtila, on an isle of warlocks set in the sea of what I think a warlock world. Long I slaved for the black robes, I and my comrades, till they dragged me to this ship that had dropped anchor in Emakhtila harbor. And here ever since I have bent over my oar, watching their wizardries and fighting to keep my soul from being sucked from me."

"A horn that poured out sleep!" said Kenton, puzzled. "But that I do not understand, Sigurd."

"You will, comrade," Sigurd said grimly. "Soon enough you will. Zachel plays it well— Listen—it begins."

From behind them a deep, droning, mellow horn note sounded. Low pitched, vibrant, continuous, it crept into the ears, and seemed to pour through them along every nerve, touching them, caressing them with the soft fingers of the very soul of poppied sleep.

The note droned on, dripping sleep.

The Viking's eyes were fierce and strained with struggle against slumber. Slowly, slowly the lids closed over them. His hands relaxed, the fingers opened, his body swayed, his head dropped upon his chest. Then like a man from whom all life is suddenly withdrawn, every muscle flaccid, he slumped down upon the bench.

The note droned on. The four slaves at the stroke oar lay with heads on outstretched arms.

Fight as hard as Kenton might, he could not thrust away that soft, clinging slumber that pressed inexorably in on him from every side. A numbness crept through his body. Sleep, sleep— swarms of infinite particles of sleep were drifting through him,

drifting with his blood through every vein, along every nerve, clogging his brain.

Lower and lower dropped his own lids.

And suddenly he could no longer fight. Chains rattling, down against Sigurd he fell, wrapped in that same impenetrable web of sleep.

Chapter Twelve

SOMETHING DEEP WITHIN KENTON WHISPERED TO HIM TO awaken; something reached down into the abysses of his charmed slumber and drew up to its surface his drugged consciousness. Slowly his heavy lids began to rise—then stopped, obeying some subtle warning. He looked out through narrowest slits. The chains that bound his wrists to the riveted manacles of the oar were long. He had moved in his sleep and now lay with head on arm stretched along the back of the low bench. He faced the ivory deck.

There, at its edge, looking down upon him, was Sharane. Veils of palest blue, through which the hands of Assyrian maids long dust had woven golden lotuses, draped her breast, coiled round her slender waist, and fell to the delicate, sandaled feet. Her black haired maiden Satalu beside her, she leaned over, scanning him. The wide, clear eyes were shadowed by a pity that held within it half scornful wonder.

His heart leaped to her loveliness. Here was his mate—in this world or any other this was his woman! And not by any of the standards of his own lost world could she be won.

"Mistress," he heard Satalu say, "he cannot be man of Nergal, since Nergal's men have chained him there."

"No," mused Sharane. "No—in that I was wrong. And had he been of Nergal, never could he have crossed the barrier. Nor would Klaneth have taunted me—as he did—"

"He is very handsome and young," sighed Satalu—"and strong. He fought the priests like a lion lord."

"Even a cornered rat will fight," answered Sharane, scornful. "He let himself be led to his chains like a whipped dog. And he lied to me! He came to me in borrowed plumes bearing a sword he could not use!"

Her clenched hands trembled; she beat with them upon her breast.

"Oh," cried the Lady Sharane—and half of that cry was a sob—"oh, Satalu, I am shamed! Liar and coward and slave—still he stirs something in my heart that never yet has stirred for man. Oh, I am shamed—I am shamed, Satalu!"

"Lady Sharane, do not weep!" Satalu caught the fluttering hands. "He may be none of these. How do you know? Perhaps he did speak the truth. How know we what has happened in that world of ours so long lost to us? And he is very handsome—and young!"

"At least," said Sharane, and bitterly, "he is a slave."

"Sh-h!" warned Satalu. "Zachel comes."

They turned; walked toward Sharane's cabin, out of Kenton's vision. He heard soft steps nearing him; closed his eyes. The overseer paused beside him; evidently scanning him closely, suspiciously. He put his hand on Kenton's head and pushed it from the pillow of his arm. Kenton let it fall limply, dragging the arm down with it. Satisfied that the spell of the horn still held him, Zachel passed on.

The wakening whistle shrilled. There was a stir among the

slaves, and Kenton groaned, raised himself, rubbed eyes, and gripped the oar.

Exultation was in his heart. There could be no mistaking Sharane's words. He held her. By a slender thread, it might be; but still—he held her. And if he were not a slave—when slave he ceased to be—what then? By no slender thread then would he hold her. He laughed—but softly, lest Zachel hear. Sigurd looked at him curiously.

"The sleep horn must have brought you gay dream, Kenton," he murmured.

"Gay, indeed, Sigurd," he answered. "The kind of dream that will thin our chains until we can snap them."

"Odin send more dreams like it," grunted the Norseman.

When Zachel blew the horn again Kenton had no need of it to send him to sleep. For the sharp eyes of the overseer had seen through Sigurd's self-sacrificing stratagem, and he had watched Kenton continually, lashing him when he faltered or let the whole burden of the oar fall upon the Norseman. His hands were blistered, every bone and muscle ached, and his mind lay dulled in his weary body. And thus it was between the next five sleeps.

Once he roused himself enough to ask of Sigurd a question that had been going round and round in his brain. Half the rowers in the pit were behind the line that separated black deck from ivory deck—that line which neither Klaneth and his crew nor Sharane and her women could cross. Yet Zachel roamed at will from one end of that pit to the other; other priests, too, for he had seen them. And although he had not seen Klaneth or Gigi or the Persian there, he did not doubt that they could come and go if they so wished. Why, then, did not the black robes swarm up the farther side and overwhelm the rosy cabin? Why did not Sharane and her women drop into the pit and lay siege to the ebon cabin? Why did they not launch their javelins, their ar-

rows, over the pit of the rowers into the wolfpack of the black priest?

It was a warlock ship, the Viking had repeated, and the spell upon it no simple one. The slave who had died had told him that he had been on the ship since the gods had launched her, and that the same unseen, mysterious barrier shut off the side of the rower's that rimmed Sharane's deck. Nor could javelin or arrow or other missile other than those hurled by god and goddess penetrate it. Humanly, each opposing camp was helpless against the other. There were other rules, too, the slave had told him. For instance, neither Sharane nor Klaneth could leave the ship when it hove to in harbor. Sharane's women could. The black priest's men, yes—but not for long. Soon they must return. The ship drew them back. What would happen to them if they did not? The slave had not known, had said that such thing was impossible. The ship would draw them back.

Kenton pondered over all this as with aching back he pushed and pulled at the oar. Decidedly these were practical, efficient deities who had doomed the ship, overlooking no detail, he thought, half amused. Well, they had created the game, and certainly they had the right to make that game's rules. He wondered whether Sharane could roam at will from stem to stern when he had conquered the ship. Wondering still, he heard the drone of Zachel's horn begin, and pitched, content, into the bottomless *oubliette* of sleep it opened.

He awoke from the sixth sleep with mind crystal clear, an astonishing sense of well-being, and a body once more free from pain and flexible and vigorous. He pulled at his oar strongly and easily.

"Strength flows up to you from the sea through blade, even as I foretold, blood brother," grunted Sigurd.

Kenton nodded absently, his sharpened mind grappling with the problem of escape from his chains. What went on in the pit

and on the ship while the rowers were asleep? What chance would offer then to free himself and the Viking if he could stay awake?

If he could stay awake!

But how could he close his ears to that horn which poured sleep into them as the sirens of old poured with their songs fatal fascination into the ears of sailors strayed within their ken?

The sirens! The story of crafty Ulysses's adventure with those lethal sea women flashed into his memory. How desire had come upon that wanderer to hear the siren song—yet no desire to let it draw him to them. How he had sailed into their domain; had filled his oarsmen's ears with melted wax; had made them bind him to the mast with open ears, and then, cursing, straining at his bonds, mad with desire to leap into their white arms, had heard their enchanted measures—and sailed safe away.

That was it! Some way he must shut his ears to the horn. But how?

A wind arose—a steady wind that filled the sail and drove the ship through gently cresting waves. Came command to rest oars. Kenton slouched down upon the bench. Sigurd was in one of his silent moods, face brooding, gaze far away, filled with dreams of other days when his dragons cleft the Northern Ocean, side shields draped and eager for the sword smiting.

Kenton dropped his hands upon the silken rags upon his legs; his fingers began, seemingly idly, to unravel their threads, twist and knot them into little silken cylinders. He worked on, the Viking unheeding. Now two were finished. He palmed one, rubbed as idly the side of his face, and so rubbing slipped the little silken cylinder into an ear. He waited for a time; slipped in the other ear the second plug. The roaring of the wind sank to a loud whispering.

Carefully, unhurrying, he drew them out; twisted more threads around them. Again he set them in place. Now the wind's

roar was only a murmuring, faint and far away. Satisfied, he slipped the silken cylinders under his torn girdle.

On sped the ship. And after a while the slaves came and dashed their buckets over him and the Viking; brought them food and drink.

On the very edge of the sleep horn drone Kenton slumped down upon the bench, face on forearms, the silken cylinders hidden under thumbs. Swiftly he slipped them in his ears. Then he let every muscle go limp. The droning diminished to a faint, hardly heard humming. Even so, a languor crept through him. He fought it. In it was none of that inexorable slumberous command that saturated the horn's full note. He beat the languor back. The humming ceased. He heard the overseer go by him; looked after him through half raised lids; saw him ascend the pit's steps and pass over the deck to Klaneth's cabin.

The black deck was empty. As though shifting in slumber, Kenton rolled over, threw an arm across the back of the bench, rested his head upon it, and through lowered lashes took stock of what lay behind him.

The slaves at the oars lay sprawled, asleep. His gaze rested on the two blacks among the ancient, brown skinned men. Could he trust them to fight with him and the Viking, he wondered?

He heard laughter, golden, chiming. To the edge of her deck, black haired Satalu beside her, walked Sharane. She seated herself there, unbound her hair, shook the flaming red gold cloud of it over face and shoulders; sat within it as though within a perfumed, silken red gold tent. Satalu raised a shining tress; began to comb it.

Through that web of loveliness he felt Sharane's eyes upon him. Involuntarily his own opened wide; clung to her hidden ones. She gasped, half rose, parted the curtains of her hair, stared at him in wonder.

"He is awake!" she whispered.

And equal wonder filled the face of Satalu.

"Sharane!" he breathed.

He watched shame creep again into her eyes—her face grow cold. She raised her head, sniffed daintily.

"Satalu," she said, "is there not a stronger taint from the pit?" Again she tilted her nose. "Yes—I am sure there is. Like the old slave market at Uruk when they brought the new slaves in."

"I—I notice it not, mistress," faltered Satalu, pity for him in her look.

"Why, yes—of course." Sharane's voice was merciless. "See—there he sits. A new slave; a strange slave who sleeps with open eyes."

"Yet he—he—looks not like a slave," again faltered her handmaiden.

"No?" questioned Sharane sweetly. "What has happened to your memory, girl? What is the badge of a slave?"

Once more the pity-filled glance of the black haired girl. She did not answer; bent low over the locks of her mistress.

"A chain and the brand of whips," mocked Sharane. "These are the slave's badge. And the new slave has both—in plenty."

Still Kenton was silent beneath her mockery; made no movement; indeed scarce heard her, his burning eyes drinking in her beauty.

"Ah, but I dreamed one came to me with great words, a bearer of promises, fanning hope in my heart," sighed Sharane. "I opened my heart to him—in that dream, Satalu. All my heart! And he repaid me with lies—and his promises were empty—and he was a weakling—and my girls beat him. And now it seems to me that there sits that liar and weakling of my dream with brand of whip upon his back and weak hands chained. A slave!"

"Mistress! Oh, mistress!" whispered Satalu.

But Kenton kept silence, although now her mockery began to sting.

And suddenly she arose, thrust hands through shining locks.

"Satalu," she murmured, "would you not think that sight of me would awaken even a slave? That any slave, so he were young and strong, would break his chains—for me?"

She swayed, turned; through her thin robes gleamed exquisite, rosy curves of breast and thigh; lithe loveliness. She spread wide the nets of her hair, peered through them at him with wanton eyes; preened herself, thrust out a tiny, rosy foot, a dimpled knee.

He raised his head recklessly, the hot blood rushing through him.

"The chains will break, Sharane!" he called. "I will break them—never fear! And then—"

"And then my girls will beat you as before!" she cried, and sped away.

He watched her go, pulse beating like drums. He saw her halt, whisper to Satalu. The black haired girl turned, made him a warning gesture. He closed his eyes, dropped head on arm. And soon he heard the feet of Zachel striding down the steps, go by him. The waking whistle shrilled. Why, if her mockery had been real, had she warned him?

GIGI MAKES A VOW

Chapter Thirteen

SHARANE LOOKED DOWN UPON HIM AGAIN FROM HER DECK. Time had gone by since she had stood there mocking him. Time had gone, but how measured in his own lost world Kenton had no means of telling, meshed as he was in the ship's timeless web. Sleep after sleep he had lain on his bench, watching for her. She had kept to her cabin—or if she had not, she had kept herself from his sight.

Nor had he told the Viking that he had broken the spell of the sleep horn. Sigurd he trusted, heart and soul. Yet he was not sure of the Norseman's subtlety; certain that he could feign the charmed slumber as Kenton could. Trust Sigurd as he did, he could not take that risk.

And now again Sharane stood and looked down upon him from the platform close to the emerald mast. The slaves slept. There was none at watch on the black deck. There was no mockery now in Sharane's face. And when she spoke she struck straight home to the heart of her purpose.

"Whoever you are, whatever you may be," she said, "two

things can you do. Cross the barrier. Remain awake when the other—slaves—must sleep. You have told me that you can break your chains. Since those two things you can do—I find belief within me that of the third you speak the truth. Unless—"

She paused; he read her thought.

"Unless I lied to you about that as I lied to you before," he said levelly. "Well, those were no lies I told you. But—go on."

"If you break your chains," she said, "I will give you your sword—if with it you will slay Klaneth. If you can break your chains—something tells me you can slay Klaneth with that sword which certainly is Nabu's own. If you will."

Again she paused, searching him with wide eyes.

"Will you?" she asked.

He feigned to consider.

"Why should I kill Klaneth?" he asked at last.

"Why? Why?" Scorn tinged her voice. "Has he not set his chains upon you? Had you whipped? Made you slave?"

"Did not Sharane drive me forth with javelins?" he asked. "Did not Sharane pour salt in my wounds with her mockery—her laughter?"

"But—you lied to me!" she cried.

Again he feigned consideration.

"What will this liar, weakling, and slave gain if he kills the black priest for you?" he asked bluntly.

"Gain?" she repeated blankly.

"What will you pay me for it?" he said.

"Pay you? Pay you! Oh!" The scorn in her eyes scorched him. "You shall be paid. You shall have freedom—the pick of my jewels—all of them—"

"Freedom I shall have when I have slain Klaneth," he answered. "And of what use to me are your jewels on this cursed ship?"

"You do not understand," she said. "The black priest slain, I

can set you on any land you wish in this world. In all of them jewels have value."

She paused, then: "And have they no worth in that land from whence you come, and to which, unchained, it seems you can return whenever danger threatens?" Her voice was honeyed poison. But Kenton only laughed.

"What more do you want?" she asked. "If they be not enough —what more?"

"You!" he said.

"Me!" she gasped incredulously. "I—give myself to any man —for a price! I—give myself to you! You whipped dog!" she stormed. "Never!"

Now, up to this Kenton's play with her had been calculated; matchery of her mockery with his own, to dissolve in the acid of her rage that film of contempt for him which, well he knew, still dwelt within her mind; but now he spoke with wrath as real and hot as hers.

"No!" cried Kenton. "No! You'll not give yourself to me! For, by God, Sharane, I'll take you!"

He thrust a clenched, chained hand out to her.

"Master of this ship I'll be, and with no help from you—you who have called me liar and slave and now would throw me butcher's pay. No! When I master this ship it will be by my own hand. And that same hand shall master—you!"

"You threaten me!" Her face flamed wrath. "You! *You* dare threaten *me!*"

She thrust a hand into her breast, drew out a slender knife—hurled it at him. As though it had struck some adamantine wall, invisible, it clanged, fell to her feet, blade snapped from hilt.

She paled, shrank back; one look of hate she threw him; then fled to her cabin.

"Hate me!" jeered Kenton as she ran. "Hate me, Sharane! For

what is hate but the flame that cleanseth the cup for wine of love!"

With no soft closing of her door did she go within the rosy cabin. And Kenton, laughing grimly, bent his head over his oar; was soon as sound asleep as the Norseman snoring beside him.

There came another time when, as he lay luxuriating in the full new tides of life within him, listening to the rush of waves past the ship, the hum of a warm and scented wind playing through the stays, he heard a stir upon Sharane's balcony, a cooing welcome from her doves. Out upon it she stepped, the handmaiden Satalu at her side.

His eyes dwelt upon her sweetly amorous, scarlet mouth, the tiny chalice for kisses at her throat. She paid no heed to him, gaze far away upon the mist girdled waters. She leaned far out over the balcony on white and rounded arms; softly began to sing. And this was Sharane's song:

"In Babylon red roses blow,
All who list may kiss and wear them;
Wide to all their hearts they throw,
Ev'ry vagrant wind may share them;
King or slave may be their lover,
Any bee above them hover
Sipping from their lips the dew—
Roses—roses—wanton roses!
I am not like you!"

The golden voice ceased. And Kenton, sensing well the hidden meaning of her song, reddened with mingled shame and remorse. Again she sang:

"Honey sweet with heart of fire
Hides a white rose in a bower,
'Tis the rose of Heart's Desire,
Only one may pluck its flower;
Bold and strong must be the lover
Who its wonder may uncover,
Pass the wanton roses by—
Rose—rose—hidden rose!
Rose like you am I!"

Echoes of her song still sighing, she turned; still with no glance for him swept back into her cabin.

And Kenton was filled with such longing for her that for the first time black despair touched him. After all—*could* he break his chains? Would ever again he find himself plucked from the ship, spun through the interlaced atoms of these two worlds and come to rest upon his own? Free! And with power to summon the ship, board it once more—and now he knew what he would do to safeguard himself against chains and black priest if that chance would but return.

But would it return? It must! Resolutely he shook off the despair.

Other sleeps went by. And stronger and stronger grew Kenton, with a body like tempered steel and arms and broad shoulders that now could swing the oar as easily and tirelessly as Sigurd himself.

Again he awakened to a stirring and humming through all the ship. On ivory deck and black the ship's folk stood, pointing, talking, gesticulating. A flock of birds, the first he had seen in this strange world, hovered above him. Their wings were shaped like those of great butterflies. Their plumage shone as though lacquered in glowing vermilions and pale golds. From their

opened beaks came a shining tumult as of little tinkling bells.

"Land!" the Viking exclaimed. "We run into harbor, Kenton. Food and water must be low."

There was a brisk wind blowing and the oars at rest. Careless of Zachel's lash, Kenton leaped up on the bench, looked over the bow. The overseer gave no heed, his own eyes intent upon what lay before.

It was a sun yellow isle, high and rounded, and splashed with craters of color like nests of rainbows. Save for these pansied dapplings, the island curved all glowing topaz, from its base in the opalescent shallows of the azure sea to its crest, where feathered trees dropped branches like immense *panaches* of ostrich plumes dyed golden amber. Over and about that golden isle shot flashes of iridescences from what seemed luminous flying flowers.

Closer drew the ship. At the bow the damsels of Sharane clustered, laughing and chattering. And upon her balcony was Sharane, watching the isle with wistful eyes.

Now it was close indeed. Down ran the peacock sail. The ship rolled slowly and more slowly to the shore; not until the curved prow had almost touched that shore did the steersman shift the rudder and bring the ship sharply about. As they drifted, the plumes of the strange trees swept the deck with long leaves, delicately feathered as those the frost etches on the winter pane. Topaz yellow and sun amber were those leaves; the branches from which they hung glistened as though cut from yellow chrysolite. Immense clusters of flowers dropped from them, lily shaped, flame scarlet.

Slowly, ever more slowly, drifted the ship. It crept by a wide cleft that cut into the heart of the isle. The sides of this vale were harlequined with the cratered colors, and Kenton saw that these were fields of flowers, clustered as though they filled deep circular amphitheaters. The flashing iridescences were birds—birds of every size from smallest dragon flies to those whose

wingspread was that of condors in the high Andes. Large and small, on each glittered the lacquered butterfly wings.

The isle breathed fragrance. Of green upon it there was none, save for the emerald glintings of the birds.

The valley slid behind them. Ever more slowly the feathered trees brushed the deck. The ship slipped into the mouth of a glen at whose end a cataract dropped rain of pearl into a golden ferned pool. There was the rattling of a chain; an anchor splashed. The bow of the ship swung in; nosed through the foliage; touched the bank.

Over the rail climbed the women of Sharane, upon their heads great baskets. From her balcony Sharane looked after them with deeper wistfulness. The women melted within the flower spangled boskage; fainter and fainter came their voices; died away. Sharane, chin cupped in white hands, drank in the land with wide and longing eyes. Above her red gold hair streaming through the silver crescent a bird hovered—a bird all gleaming emeralds and flashing blues, chiming peals of fairy bells. Kenton saw tears upon her cheeks. She caught his gaze, dashed them away angrily. She half turned as though to go; then slipped down woefully behind one of her balcony's tiny blossoming trees where he could no longer see her weeping.

Now her women filed back along the bank, their baskets filled with plunder; fruits, gourds purple and white, and great clusters of those pods he had eaten when first he had broken fast upon the ship. Into the cabin they trooped, and out again with baskets empty. Time upon time they came and went. At last they bore away skins instead of the woven hampers; water bags which they filled from the pool of the cataract. Time upon time they brought them back, swollen full, upon their shoulders.

They trooped out once more, burdenless; darted joyously over the rail; doffed their scanty enough robes and plunged into the pool. Like water nymphs they swam and played, the pearly

flow caressing, streaming from delicately delicious curves—pale ivory, warm rose, soft olive. They sprang from the pool, wove flower crowns and with sprays of the fragrant lily blooms in arms clambered, reluctant, over the side and into the rosy cabin.

Now crawled over the rail the men of Klaneth. They slipped on and off the ship with their burdens, poured the last water skins into the casks.

Again there was stir upon the ship. The chains rattled, the anchor lifted. Up and down flashed the oars, drawing the ship from the bank. Up rose the peacock sail. The ship veered, caught the wind, swam slowly through the amethystine shallows. Faster swung the sweeps. The golden isle diminished; was a saffron shadow in the mists; vanished.

On sailed the ship.

And on and on—by what signs or reckonings or to what port Kenton could not know. Sleep after sleep it sailed. The huge bowl of silver mists whose edge was the horizon contracted or expanded as those mists thickened or thinned. Storms they met and weathered; roaring storms that changed the silver of the mists to lurid copper, ambered jet, darkness deeper than night. Sudden storms threaded with lightnings weird and beautiful. Lightnings that were like the shatterings of immense prisms, the breakings of rainbows of jewels. Storms that trod on feet of thunder. Thunder that was metallic, tintinnabulatory; hurricanes of clashing cymbals following showers of multi-colored flame.

Steadily strength of the sea poured into Kenton up his oar blade, even as Sigurd had promised; remaking him, hardening him, turning all his body into a machine as finely tempered as a rapier and as flexible. Often he wondered what was happening in that room of his where rested the jeweled bark, the mysterious symbol of this ship on which he sailed, the enigmatic ferry be-

tween two worlds. How long had he been away from that room by his own world's time?

Between sleeps Sigurd whispered to him Viking tales, Sagas unsung, epics of the Norse heroic and forgotten. Steadily their friendship, their brotherhood, grew.

Twice the black priest sent for him; questioned him, threatened him, cajoled him—vainly. And each time with blacker, more venomous face had sent him back to his chains.

Strife of god and goddess there was none. And Sharane during the sleep time of the slaves kept to her cabin. Awake, he could not turn his head to seek her without inviting the bite of Zachel's lash. So often he let the horn of sleep have its way—what use to keep awake while Sharane hid?

There came a time when, lying awake, he heard steps coming down the pit's stair. He turned, face against the back of his bench, as though in troubled slumber. The steps paused beside him.

"Zubran," it was the voice of Gigi, "this man has become a young lion."

"Strong enough," grunted the Persian. "It is a pity that his strength be wasted here—driving this ship from one place of weariness to another as bad."

"I think as you," said Gigi. "Strength he now has. Also he has courage. You remember how he slew the priests."

"Remember!" There was no boredom in Zubran's voice now. "Can I forget! By the heart of Rustum—could I forget! It was the first draft of life given me, it seemed, for centuries. I owe him something for that."

"Also," went on Gigi, "he has loyalty where his heart turns. I told you how he shielded with his own back the man who sleeps beside him. I liked him well for that, Zubran."

"As a gesture," said the Persian, "it was magnificent! A trifle florid, perhaps, for perfect taste. But still—magnificent!"

"Courage, loyalty, strength," mused the drummer; then, slowly, a hint of mirth in his voice. "And wit. Unusual wit, Zubran. Since he has found a way to shut his ears to the sleep horn—and lies here now wide awake, pretending to us that he is asleep!"

Kenton's heart stopped; began to beat furiously. How did the drummer know? Did he know? Was it only a guess? Desperately he strove against quivering nerves; forced his body to remain inert.

"What!" exclaimed the Persian, incredulously. "Awake! Gigi —you dream!"

"Nay," said Gigi quietly. "I have watched him when he saw me not. He is awake, Zubran. Listening."

Suddenly Kenton felt his paw upon his breast, pressing upon his pounding heart. The drummer chuckled; withdrew the hand.

"Also," he said, approvingly, "he has caution. A little he trusts me—but not too much. Nor does he know *you* well enough as yet, Zubran, to give you any trust at all. Therefore he lies quiet, saying to himself: 'Gigi cannot really know. He cannot be sure as long as I open not my eyes.' Yes, he has caution. But see, Zubran, he cannot keep the blood from stealing up into his face, nor slow his heart to the calm rhythm of sleep."

Again he chuckled, half-maliciously.

"And there is other proof of his caution, in that he has not told his comrade that the horn has no power over him. Hear him snore? No mistaking that for wakefulness. I like that too—he knows that a secret shared by two runs constant risk of remaining no secret at all."

"He seems sound asleep to me." Kenton felt the Persian bend down over him, doubtfully.

His eyelids fought to rise; by sheer will he kept them down, breathing regularly, motionless. How long would they stand

there looking at him? How long could he keep up this semblance of sleep under their gaze?

At last Gigi broke the silence.

"Zubran," he said, quietly, "like you, I tire of the black priest and this fruitless strife between Ishtar and Nergal. Yet bound by our vows neither you nor I may come to grips with Klaneth, nor may we harm his men. It matters not that by trickery were those vows gotten from us. We made them—and they bind. As long as Nergal's priest rules Nergal's deck we may not give him battle. But suppose Klaneth no longer ruled—that another hand thrust him to his dark master?"

"A mighty hand that! Where on these seas could we find such a hand? And if found, how persuade it to close on Klaneth?" jeered the Persian.

"I think—it is here." Kenton felt again the drummer's touch. "Courage and loyalty and strength, quick wit and caution. He has all these. Besides—he can pass the barrier!"

"By Ahriman! That is so!" whispered the Persian.

"Now I would make another vow," said Gigi. "A vow in which you would join. If this man's chains were—broken, easily then could he pass to Sharane's cabin; easily now, I think, regain his sword."

"Well, what then?" asked Zubran. "He would still have Klaneth to meet and all his pack. And we could not help him."

"No," answered the drummer. "But neither would we hinder him. Our vows bind us not to fight *for* the black priest, Zubran. Were I this man—with chains broken and sword regained—I would find way to release this comrade sleeping beside him. He, I think, could keep off the pack while this wolf cub, who is now no longer cub but grown, could match himself against the priest."

"Well—" the Persian began doubtfully; then changed to cheerfulness—"I would see him loosed, Gigi. At the least, it

would give break to this cursed monotony. But you spoke of a vow."

"A vow for a vow," answered Gigi. "If broken were his chains, if he regained sword, if he met Klaneth and we fought not against him at Klaneth's side, and if he slew Klaneth, would he vow comradeship with you and me, Zubran? I wonder."

"Why should he make that vow to us," asked Zubran, "unless—we also loosed his chains?"

"Exactly," whispered Gigi. "For if he made that vow—I *would* loose them!"

Hope sprang flaming up in Kenton. Cold doubt followed. Was this all a trap? A trick to torment him? He would take no chance —and yet—freedom!

Gigi again bent over him.

"Trust me, wolf," he said, low. "Vow for vow. If you accept —look at me."

Suddenly doubt fled. The dice were offered him. Were they straight or weighted, he would cast them. He opened his eyes, stared straight for an instant into the twinkling beads of jet so close. Then he closed them tight; resumed his slow breathing; his semblance of deepest slumber.

And Gigi rose from him, laughing. He heard the two move away, up the pit's steps.

Freedom again! Could it be true? And when would Gigi—were it true and no trap—when would Gigi loose his chains? Long he lay between fiery hope and chilling doubt. Could it be true?

Freedom! And—

Sharane!

THE CHAINS ARE LOOSED

Chapter Fourteen

NOT LONG DID KENTON HAVE TO WAIT. HARDLY HAD THE FAINT hum of the sleep horn died than he felt a touch on his shoulder. He thought it was Zachel, and lay limp. Long fingers twitched his ears, raised his eyelids. He looked into the face of Gigi. He pulled out the little silken cylinders that shut off the compelling slumber of the horn.

"So that is how you did it." Gigi examined them with interest. He squatted down beside Kenton.

"Wolf," he said, "I have come to have a talk with you, so that you may know Zubran and me a little better; perhaps, see more clearly the road on which soon your feet may be set. I would sit here beside you, but some of those cursed priests may come prowling around. Therefore, in a moment I shall seat myself on Zachel's stool. When I have done so, turn you around facing me, taking that highly deceptive attitude I have so often watched you assume."

He stepped up on the bench, scanning both decks.

"We will have plenty of time." He squatted again on the bench.

"Zubran is with Klaneth, arguing about the gods. Zubran, although sworn to Nergal, thinks him a rather inferior copy of Ahriman, the Persian god of darkness. He is also convinced that this whole matter of warfare between Nergal and Ishtar for the ship lacks not only originality and ingenuity, but taste—something, indeed, that his own gods and goddesses would not do; if they did, would do much better. This angers Klaneth, which greatly rejoices Zubran."

Once more he arose and looked about him.

"However," he went on, "this time he is doing it to keep Klaneth and especially Zachel away while we talk, since Klaneth leans a great deal upon Zachel in these arguments. I have told them that I cannot bear their talk, and that I will watch on Zachel's seat until it is finished. And it will not be finished until I return, for Zubran is clever, oh, very clever and he expects our talk to lead, ultimately, to permanent relief of his boredom."

He glanced slyly at the ivory deck.

"So do not fear, wolf." He swayed up on his dwarfed legs. "Only as I go, slip sideways and keep your eyes on me. I will give you warning if warning is needed."

He waddled away, climbed into the overseer's seat. Kenton, obeying him, turned sleepily; rested arm on bench and head on arm.

"Wolf," said Gigi suddenly, "is there a shrub called the *chilquor* in the place from whence you came?"

Kenton stared at him, struck dumb by such a question. Yet Gigi must have some reason for asking it. Had he ever heard of such a shrub? He searched his memory.

"Its leaves are about so large." Gigi parted finger-tips for inches three. "It grows only upon the edge of the desert and it is rare—sorrowfully rare. Look you—perhaps you know it by another name. Perhaps this will enlighten you. You bruise the buds just before they open. Then you mix them with sesamum oil and

honey and a little burned ivory and spread it like a paste over your head. Then you rub and rub and rub—so and so and so—" he illustrated vigorously upon his bald and shining pate.

"And after a little," he said, "the hair begins to sprout; like grain under the rains of spring it grows, until soon—lo—naked dome is covered. Instead of the light flying off affrighted from shining dome it plays within new hair. And once more the man who was bald is beautiful in the eyes of woman!

"By Nadak of the Goats! By Tanith, the dispenser of delights!" cried Gigi with enthusiasm. "That paste grows hair! How it does grow hair! Upon a melon would it grow it. Yes, even those planks rightly rubbed by it would sprout hair like grass! You are sure you do not know it?"

Struggling with his stark amaze Kenton shook his head.

"Well," said Gigi, sorrowfully. "All this the *chilquor* buds can do. And so I search for them—" here he sighed mightily—"who would once more be beautiful in woman's eyes."

He sighed again. Then one by one he flecked the backs of the sleeping slaves with Zachel's whip—even the back of Sigurd.

"Yes," he said, "yes, they sleep."

His black eyes twinkled on Kenton, the slit mouth grinned.

"You wonder," he said, "why I talk of such trivial matters as shrubs and hair and bald pates, while you lie chained. Well, wolf, these matters are far from trivial. They brought me here. And were I not here—would you have hope of freedom, think you? Ah, no," said Gigi. "Life is a serious matter. Therefore all parts of it must be serious. And therefore no part of it can be trivial. Let us rest for a moment, wolf, while you absorb that great truth."

Again, one by one, he flecked the backs of the sleeping slaves.

"Well, wolf," he went on, "now I shall tell you how I came aboard this ship because of the *chilquor*, its effect on hair and because of my bald pate. And you shall see how your fortune rests

upon them. Wolf, when I was but a child in Nineveh, girls found me singularly attractive.

" 'Gigi!' they would cry as I passed by them. 'Gigi, little love, little darling! Kiss me, Gigi!' "

Gigi's voice was ludicrously languishing; Kenton, forgetting his plight, could not restrain laughter.

"You laugh, wolf!" observed the drummer. "Well—that makes us understand each other better."

His eyes twinkled impishly.

"Yes," he said, " 'Kiss me,' they cried. And I would kiss them, because I found them all as singularly attractive as each found me. And as I grew this mutual attraction increased. You have no doubt noticed," said Gigi complacently, "that I am an unusual figure of a man. But as I grew out of adolescence my greatest beauty was, perhaps, my hair. It was long and black and ringletted, and it fell far over my shoulders. I perfumed it and cared for it, and the tender little vessels of joy who loved me would twine their fingers in it when I lifted them upon my head or when my head was on their knees. They joyed in it even as I.

"And then I had a fever. When I recovered, all my beautiful hair was gone!"

He paused to sigh again.

"There was a woman of Nineveh who pitied me. She it was who anointed my head with the *chilquor* paste; told me how to make it; showed me the growing shrub. After years of—ah, mutual attraction—I had fever again. And again my hair vanished. I was in Tyre then, wolf, and made what haste I could to return to Nineveh. When I did return the kindly woman was dead and a sand storm had covered the spot where she had pointed out to me the *chilquor* shrubs!"

He sighed, prodigiously. Kenton, amused and fascinated by his tale as he was, could not forbear a suspicious glance after that melancholy exhalation. It seemed overdone.

"Then before I could search further," went on Gigi, hurriedly, "word came to me that one who loved me—a princess, wolf—was on her way to Nineveh to see me. Shame was mine and anguish! I could not meet her with a bald pate, wolf. For no one loves a bald man!"

"Nobody loves a fat man," grinned Kenton. He had spoken, it seemed in his own tongue, for the drummer apparently had not understood.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said," answered Kenton, gravely, "that for one whose excellencies are as great as yours, the loss of your hair should have been of no more consequence to a woman than the falling of one feather from a pet bird."

"That is a fine tongue of yours," remarked Gigi, stolidly. "It can say so much in so few sounds.

"Well," he continued. "I was distressed indeed. I could have hidden—but I feared my will would not be strong enough to keep me hid. She was a very lovely princess, wolf. Besides, I knew that if she found out I was in Nineveh, as find out she surely would, she would rout me out. She was a fair woman, wolf. And this is the one difference between the fair women and the dark—that the latter wait for you to come for them, but the former search for you. And I could go to no other city to hide—for in each of them were other women who admired me. What was I to do?"

"Why didn't you get a wig?" asked Kenton, interested now in Gigi's tale to the extent of forgetting entirely where he was.

"I told you, wolf, that they loved to thread their fingers through my locks," answered Gigi, severely. "Could any wig stay in place under such treatment? Not when the women were such as loved me— No! No! I will tell you what I did. And here is where you will see how my lost hair and you are entangled. The High Priest of Nergal in Nineveh was a friend of mine. I went

to him and asked him first to work a magic that would plant my head afresh with hair. He was indignant—said that his art was not to be debased for such a common purpose.

"It was then, wolf, that I began to have my suspicions of the real power of these sorcerers. I had seen this priest perform great magic. He had raised phantoms that had raised my hair—when I had it. How much easier then ought it to have been for him to have raised my hair without the trouble of raising the phantoms too? I suggested this. He grew more indignant—said that he dealt with gods, not barbers!

"But now I know better. He could not do it! I made the best of the matter, however, and asked him to put me for a while where my princess could not find me and where, weak willed, I could not go to her. He smiled, wolf, and said he knew just the place. He inducted me as an acolyte to Nergal and gave me a token that he said would insure me recognition and good will from one he named Klaneth. Also he sealed me with certain vows, not to be broken. I took them cheerfully, thinking them but temporary and his friend Klaneth the high priest of some hidden temple where I would be safe. I went to sleep that night trustfully, happy as a child. I awakened, wolf—here!

"It was a sorry jest," muttered Gigi, angrily. "And a sorry jest would it be for that Ninevite priest if I knew the way back to him!

"And here I have been ever since," he added, briskly. "Barred by my acolytage to Nergal from crossing to that other deck where there is a little vessel of joy named Satalu that I would fain take within my hands. Barred by my vows from slaying Klaneth. Barred by other vows from leaving the ship wherever it may touch for food and gear—since it was sanctuary I asked from which I could not go nor my princess come to me. By Tiamat of the Abyss—I got the sanctuary I asked!" he exclaimed, rue-

fully enough. "And by Bel who conquered Tiamat—as weary of the ship and its fruitless strife as Zubran himself!

"But were I not here," he added, as by afterthought, "who could loose you of your chains? By shrub and lack of hair, an amorous princess and my vanity—these brought me on the ship to set you free when you came. Of such threads do the gods weave our destinies."

He leaned forward, all malice gone from twinkling eyes, a grotesque tenderness on the froglike mouth.

"I like you, wolf," he said, simply. "And do you like Gigi a little better now?"

There was wistfulness in the question; wistfulness and utter sincerity. Kenton's heart went out to him without reserve.

"I like you, Gigi." There were tears in his eyes. "Greatly, indeed, do I like you. And trust fully. But—Zubran—"

"Have no doubts about Zubran," snapped Gigi. "He, too, was tricked upon this ship and is even more eager than I to be free. Some day he shall tell you his story, as I have mine. Ho! Ho!" laughed the drummer. "Ever seeking the new, ever tiring of the known is Zubran. And this was his fate—to be shot into a whole new world and find it worse than his old. Nay, wolf, fear not Zubran. With shield and sword will he stand beside you—until he tires even of you. But even then will he be loyal."

Suddenly he grew solemn; kept unwinking gaze on Kenton, searching, it seemed, his soul.

"Consider well, wolf," he whispered. "The odds are all against you. We two may not help you as long as Klaneth is lord of his deck. It may be that you cannot free the long-haired one beside you. You have Klaneth to face and twenty of his men—and, it may be, Nergal! And if you lose—death for you, wolf—and only after long, long torture. Here, chained to your oar, you are at least alive. Consider well!"

And Kenton, without hesitation answered him; held out to him his prisoned wrists.

"When will you loose my chains, Gigi?" was all he said.

Gigi's face lighted, his black eyes blazed, he sprang upright, the jet loops on his pointed ears dancing.

"Now!" he shouted. "By Sin, the Father of Gods! By Shamash his Son and by Bel the Smiter—now!"

He thrust his hands between Kenton's waist and the great circlet of bronze that bound it; pulled it apart as though it had been made of putty. With those same prodigiously long fingers he broke the locks of the manacles on Kenton's wrists.

"Run free, wolf!" he whispered. "Run free—but craftily! And when you bite bite deep!"

With never a look behind him, he waddled slowly to the pit's steps and up them. Slowly Kenton stood upon his feet. His chains dropped from him. He looked down at the sleeping Viking. How could he unfasten his links? How, if he could unfasten, awaken him before Zachel came hurrying down among the slaves?

Swiftly he thought. A plan formed. If he could pick the locks that held Sigurd, he could put back his own broken chains upon himself; whisper to the Viking after the waking whistle shrilled what he had done, what had been done for him. Then at the right moment, the pair of them could rise, rush the overseer, slay him and leap for Sharane's deck—for it came to him that Sigurd, vowed as little either to Nergal or Ishtar as himself—could pass as easily as he the barrier that held all others back.

Again he looked about him. At the foot of the overseer's high stool lay a shining knife, long-bladed, thin-bladed! Dropped there by Gigi for him? He did not know. But he did know that with it he might pick the Viking's locks. He took a step toward it—

How long he was in taking the second step! And there was a mist before his eyes! Through that mist the sleeping forms of

the oarsmen wavered—were like phantoms! And now he could no longer see the knife.

He rubbed his eyes, looked down on Sigurd. He was a wraith, his outlines nebulous, foglike!

He looked at the sides of the ship. They melted away even as he sought them! He had a glimpse of sparkling turquoise sea. And then—it became vaporous! Was not! Ceased to be!

And now Kenton floated for an instant in thick mist shot through with silvery light. The light snapped out. He hurtled through a black void filled with tumult of vast winds that shrieked and roared but touched him never. On and on, like a meteor, he flew through that black void—

The blackness snapped out! Through his closed lids he saw light. And he was no longer falling. He stood, rocking, upon his feet. He opened his eyes.

Once more he was within his own room! Outside hummed the traffic of the avenue, punctuated by blasts of auto horns.

Kenton rushed over to the jeweled ship. Except for the slaves, on it was but one little figure—one toy. A manikin who stood half-way down the pit steps, mouth open, whip at feet, stark astonishment in every rigid line.

Zachel, the overseer!

Kenton poked him with a contemptuous finger. A toy!

He looked down into the slave pit. They lay asleep, oars in rests. He touched the bent head of Sigurd, lovingly. With finger-tips tried to move the chains on the empty seat on the bench beside the Norseman; the empty chains that fell from the oar. They were immovable—all, all immovable. Toy chains, toy oars. Sigurd—a toy! Zachel—a toy! His adventures—a dream!

So his mind, back in its own familiar environment, told him; that other part of him, which accepted the ship as reality, lying dazed with swift flight within him. And suddenly he caught sight of himself in the long mirror! Stood, wondering, before it!

For what he saw was no more the Kenton who had been borne out of that room upon the breast of the inrushing mystic sea. Mouth had hardened, eyes grown fearless, falcon bright. Over all his broadened chest the muscles ran, not bulging, bound—but graceful, flexible, and steel hard! He flexed his arms, and the muscles ran rippling along them. He turned, scanned his back in the mirror.

Scars covered it, healed teeth marks of the lash. The lash of Zachel—

Zachel—the toy!

No toy had made those scars!

No oars of toy had brought into being those muscles!

And suddenly all Kenton's mind awoke. Awoke and was filled with shame, with burning longing, seething despair.

What would Sigurd think of him when he awakened and found him gone—Sigurd with whom he had sworn blood brotherhip? What would Gigi think—Gigi, who had made vow for vow with him; and trusting him, had broken his chains? And—

Sharane!

Fresh food for her mockery, her contempt—this!

A frenzy shook him. God! He must get back! Get back before Sigurd or Gigi or Sharane knew that he was no longer on the ship. Had fled again to that place—what was it Sharane had said—the place he fled when peril threatened?

How long had he been away? As though in answer a clock began chiming. He counted. Eight strokes!

Two hours of his own time had passed while he was on the ship. Two hours only? And in those two hours all these things had happened? His body changed to—this?

Then in the two minutes he had been in the room what had happened on the ship? Did they now not know that he was gone? Sharane and Sigurd, Gigi and the Persian? Were holding him, liar, coward—traitor!

He must get back! He must!

Stop! What had Gigi said—"go craftily!"

He thought of the battle before him. Could he take his automatics with him when he went back—if he could go back? With them he could match any sorceries of the black priest. But they were in another room, in another part of his house. Again he looked at himself in the glass. If his servants saw him—thus! They would not know him. How could he explain? Who would believe him?

And they might tear him away—away from this room where the ship lay. This room that held his only doorway back into Sharane's world!

He dared not risk it.

Then swift into his brain sprang the plan. He threw himself upon the floor. Grasped the golden chains that hung from the ship's bow. So thin they were, so small, on this the ship of jeweled toys! He clenched them tight.

Then threw his whole will upon the ship! Summoning it! Commanding it!

And suddenly the golden chains stirred within his grasp. They swelled. He felt a tearing wrench that wrung from him a groan of agony. Thicker grew the chains. They were lifting him. Lifting him! Again the dreadful wrenching, tearing at every muscle, nerve and bone.

His feet swung free.

The vast winds howled around him—for a heartbeat only. They were gone. In their place was the rushing of wind driven waves. He felt the kisses of their spray.

Kenton opened his eyes. Beneath him was a racing azure sea. High above him curved the scimitared prow of the Ship of Ishtar. But not the ship of jeweled toys. No! The ensorcelled ship that sailed the strange world; the ship on which blows were

real and death lurked—death that even now might be watching him poised to grapple.

The living ship that held the promise of—Sharane!

The chain he clutched passed up the side of the bow and into a hawser port painted like a great eye between the bow-ward wall of her cabin and the curved prow. Behind him the great oars rose and fell. He could not be seen from them; the oarsmen's backs were toward him and the oar ports were besides covered with strong leather, through which the shanks slipped; shields to protect the rowers from waves dashing past those ports. Nor, under the hang of the hull as he was, could he be seen from the black deck.

Slowly, silently, hand over hand, pressing his body as close to the hull as he could, he began to creep up the chain.

Up to Sharane's cabin. Up to that little window that opened into her cabin from the closed bit of deck beneath the great scimitar.

Slowly, more slowly, he crept; pausing every few links to listen, reached at last the hawser port; threw a leg over the bulwark, and dropped upon the little deck. He rolled beneath the window; flattened himself against the cabin wall; hidden now from every eye upon the ship; hidden even from Sharane, should she peer through that window.

Crouched there—waiting!

THE SNARING OF SHARANE

Chapter Fifteen

KENTON RAISED HIS HEAD, CAUTIOUSLY. THE PLACE WHERE HE lay was the anchor deck. The chains up which he had climbed passed through a hawser port, wound around a crude windlass and were fastened to a thin, double hook that was more like a grappling iron than anchor. Near it lay a similar hook, and on the starboard bow was another windlass with chains running from it through another port. On each bulwark were deep, metal-lined grooves, over which the lowering links slid. Evidently, although control of steering gear, mast and rowers' pit was in the hands of the black priest, the women of Sharane looked after anchorage. He noted, with some anxiety, a door leading out of the cabin's farther side—the portion that housed her warrior maids. But it was not likely, he thought, that any would come out as long as the ship was under sail and oar. At any rate he would have to take that risk.

Through the opened window above him he could hear the hum of voices. Then that of Sharane came to him, pitched high and clear—and bitter.

"He broke his chains, even as he had promised—and then fled!"

"But mistress," it was Satalu. "Where could he go? He came not here. How know you that Klaneth did not take him? That he is not even now feeding his deviltries?"

"No mistaking Klaneth's wrath!" answered Sharane. "No mistaking the scourging he gave Zachel! Both were real, Satalu."

So the black priest had scourged Zachel, had he? Well, that, at any rate, was good news.

"But what puzzles them most is that he fled while the horn of sleep still held the slaves in thrall," mused Satalu.

"We know it held him not in thrall," answered Sharane, sharply. "Nay, Satalu, why argue? He had grown strong. He broke his chains. He fled. And thereby proved himself the coward I called him—and hoped he was not," she added softly. "Did I not promise him his sword if he broke chains and came to me?"

"But he did not promise to come and ask you for it," said Satalu slyly. "I think he said he would come and take it—and—"

"Be silent, girl!" Sharane's voice was wrathful. "Remind me not of that, if you would not be whipped!"

There was silence in the cabin. Then Sharane spoke again, softly, sorrowfully:

"Forgive me, Satalu. You know I would not whip you. But—he will not come again, either to ask or to take."

Then after another silence:

"I am weary. Luarda—watch outside the door. You others to your cabin to sleep—or what you will. Satalu, brush my hair a little and then leave me."

Another silence; a longer one. Then Satalu's voice:

"Mistress, you are half asleep. I go."

Kenton waited—but not long. The sill of the window was about as high above the anchor deck as his chin. He raised him-

self gently; peered within. His gaze rested first on the shrine of the luminous gems, the pearls and pale moonstones, the milky curdled crystals. He had the feeling that it was empty, tenantless! There were no flames in the seven little crystal basins.

He heard a woman sobbing. He looked down. The head of the wide divan of ivory with its golden arabesques was almost beneath him. Upon it lay Sharane, face down upon its cushions, clothed only in one thin silken veil and the floods of her red gold hair, and weeping, weeping bitterly, broken-heartedly; weeping like any woman with bruised heart, white shoulders heaving with the deep sobbing she sought to stifle in her cushions.

Weeping for—him?

He hardened his heart against her; fought down fierce desire to go to her and take her in his arms; comfort her.

A gleam of sapphire, a glint of steel caught his eyes. It was his sword—the sword of Nabu! The sword he had vowed he would not take from her hands—would take, unaided, with his own. It hung upon a low rack on the wall just above her head; so close that she need but reach up a hand to grasp it.

He drew back, waited impatiently for her weeping to cease. Love for her—or passion—he had in full. But search his heart now as he might—no pity.

And soon her sobbing lessened; died away. And after another while of waiting he slowly thrust his head again through the window; looked down upon her. She lay asleep, face turned toward the cabin door, tears still on the long lashes—but the fair breast rising and falling softly in the measured respiration of slumber.

The window was about three feet square, its casement opening inward. Kenton gripped the sill, drew himself softly up until shoulders and breast were within. Then he bent over until his waist rested on the ledge. Now his hands touched the softnesses of one of the rugs upon the floor. Lithely, noiselessly as a serpent,

he slid down, gripping the sill with his insteps. Slowly, like a tumbler, he brought his legs down; lay prone, full length, at the head of Sharane's bed.

Again he waited. Her measured breathing did not change. He drew himself up on his feet. Catlike he slipped to the door that lay between this cabin and that of the warrior maids. There was a low murmuring of voices there. He saw a bar that, lowered, slipped into a metal clutch on the other side, securing it. Noiselessly he dropped it, fastened it. Those cats were caged, he thought, grinning.

He glanced over the cabin. Upon a low stool lay a small piece of silk; over a settle a long one, scarflike. He picked up the small piece and rolled it deftly into a serviceable gag. He took the long piece and tested it. It was heavy and strong, just what he needed, he reflected—but not enough. He slipped to a wall, unhooked a similar hanging.

He tiptoed over to Sharane's bed; stood there for a moment, shaken by her loveliness. She stirred, uneasily, as though she felt his eyes on her; as though she were awakening!

Kenton acted. Before she could raise her lids he had opened her mouth, thrust the silken gag within. Then throwing himself over her, holding her down by sheer weight, he jerked up her head, wound the scarf tightly around her mouth, tied it. As swiftly he raised her from the hips and wound the balance of the scarf around her arms, pinioning them to her sides.

Eyes blazing with wrathful recognition, outrage, desperation, she tried to roll from beneath him, struck up at him with her knees. He shifted his weight, lay across her thighs, dexterously bound knees and ankles with the second scarf that he had torn from the wall.

Now she lay motionless, glaring at him; hate devils in her gaze. He sent her a kiss, mockingly. She turned, tried to throw herself upon the floor. Noiselessly still, he took other hangings,

wrapped her round and round with them. And finally he passed a pair of heavy ones under and over the bed; bound her fast with them to the divan.

Heedless of her now, he walked to the outer door. In some way he must get the handmaiden she called Luarda within the cabin, make her as helpless as her mistress—and as silent. He opened the door the merest slit, peered through it. She sat close beside it, back turned to him, gaze upon the black deck. How could he lure her in?

He tiptoed away, found another small piece of silk; snatched from the wall another hanging. The small piece he fashioned into another gag. Then he opened the door as before, placed his lips to the crack, pitched his voice high and softly, as femininely as possible, called to her:

"Luarda! The mistress wants you! Quick!"

She leaped to her feet. He shrank back, pressing himself against the wall close beside the door frame. Unsuspiciously, she opened the door; stepped within it, and paused for an instant, open-mouthed, at the sight of the Lady Sharane, bound and helpless.

That instant was all Kenton needed. One arm was around her neck, throttling her. With his free hand he thrust the gag into her mouth; in the same moment closed the door with his foot. The girl in his arms struggled like a young panther. He managed to keep her mouth closed until he had wound the lower part of her face and her neck with the hanging. Her hands swept up, clawing him; she strove to wind her legs around his, throwing him. He drew the silk tighter around her neck, strangling her. When her struggles grew feeble, he swiftly bound her arms to her side. He laid her on the floor, and pinioned, as he had Sharane's, her ankles and knees.

Helpless as her own mistress now she lay. He picked her up; carried her over to the divan; rolled her under it.

Not till then did he reach up and take down his sword. And as before, he felt strength flow through it into him. He stood before Sharane, poising it, handling it, thrusting and cutting with it.

There was no fear in the burning eyes that stared up at him. Rage enough and to spare was there—but no fear. And, with an oddly satisfying glow he realized it—neither contempt nor shame! No. Wrath filled as were her eyes, he seemed to see in them wonder—hope.

And Kenton laughed low, bent over her, and pressed his lips to her own gagged and bound ones. He kissed each wrathful eye.

"And now, Sharane," he laughed. "I go to take the ship—without your help! And when I have taken it, I will come back and cut your bonds and take—you! Yes, Lady Honey-Sweet—with or without your help—take—you!"

He walked to the door, opened it softly, swept gaze over the ship.

Chapter Sixteen

UPON THE BLACK DECK SQUATTED GIGI, FOREHEAD RESTING on the edge of the serpent drum, long arms trailing disconsolately down its sides. There was a forlornness about the drummer that made Kenton want to shout out to him. It was an impulse to which the sight of Zachel's head put speedy check. He could see just the top of it over the low rail between Sharane's deck and the rowers' pit. But he could hear the vicious crack of the lash as it struck now here, now there.

He crouched low, until the head was out of sight—knowing that in that position Zachel could not see him. He knotted the sword in his girdle. On hands and knees he crept out of the cabin door, closed it softly behind him. Suddenly he saw that there was a window in the place where her women slept. He had not remembered that! But there was no door. They must pass through Sharane's cabin to gain the deck—unless they slipped through the window. If they suspected something amiss with their mistress, found the door barred, undoubtedly they would come through that window. Well—he would have to take his

chances on that; only hope that he could get most of the work ahead of him done before they were aroused.

And if he could surprise the black priest in his den, strike swiftly and silently—then he and the Viking could make short work of the rest, and the women do what they pleased. They could neither help nor hinder. It would be too late.

He flattened himself to the deck; wriggled beneath the window; listened. There was no sound of voices now. Slowly raising himself he saw that from this point the overseer was hidden from him by the mast. Keeping a cautious eye on the disconsolate Gigi, he stood up and peered within. There were eight girls there, lying asleep; some pillowed on each other's breasts, some curled up on the silken cushions. He reached in a hand, closed the window noiselessly. Any sounds from without would be at least a little more deadened.

Again he lay flat and squirmed along the side of the cabin to the starboard rail. He slipped over it. He hung for a moment, fingers gripping the rail top, feet feeling for the chain that stretched below. Only half the distance he must travel to put the mast between himself and Zachel did that chain go. For that distance he swung along it, fingers having released rail to clutch links. When he came to its end, he raised himself, caught the rail again and swung along it swiftly hand over hand.

Now the mast was directly in front of him; he had reached the spot from which he had planned to strike his first blow. He chinned himself, and even as he had entered Sharane's cabin, he streamed over the rail like a snake and lay flat against the bulwarks until breath came once more easily.

He was in plain sight of Gigi—and as he lay Gigi's head came up with a jerk from his drum, his eyes stared straight into Kenton's own. The ugly face broke into a thousand wrinkles of amazement; then instantly became indifferent, immobile. He yawned, got upon his feet; then, hand over eyes, peered intently

over to the port side as though he had sighted something far away upon the sea.

"By Nergal, but Klaneth must know of this," he said, distinctly. Then waddled quickly as dwarfed legs would let him, over to the black cabin.

Kenton wriggled over to the edge of the pit. He had glimpse of Zachel standing upon his platform stool, peering as intently as had Gigi over the sea, searching for whatever it was that seemingly had so aroused the drummer's interest. He realized Gigi's stratagem; took instantly the move he had opened for him.

Kenton dropped into the pit. One leap he took and was beside the mast. The overseer turned sharply. With instant recognition of his danger Zachel opened mouth to yell and swept hand down to belt where long poniard was sheltered, but the sword of Kenton hissed through air and through his neck.

The sheared head of Zachel leaped from his shoulders, mouth stretched open, eyes glaring. For three heartbeats the body of Zachel stood upright, blood spouting from the severed arteries, hand still gripping at the dagger.

The body of Zachel fell, splashing Kenton with its life streams as it dropped.

From the benches of the oarsmen came no sound, no outcry; they sat, blades drooped, staring.

He groped in Zachel's belt for the overseer's keys, the keys that would unlock the manacles from Sigurd's wrists, unloose the metal belt from round his waist. He found them, snatched them loose, tore the dagger from Zachel's stiffening fingers, and raced down the narrow passageway to the Viking.

"Brother!" babbled the Norseman, half incoherent. "I thought you gone! Blood brotherhood forgotten! And by Odin, what a blow! The dog's head leaped from his shoulders as though Thor had struck it with his hammer!"

"Quiet! Sigurd, quiet!" Kenton was working with desperate

haste among the keys, trying to find those which would fit Sigurd's fetters. "No questioning now. Now we stand together you and I—fight for the ship. Hell damn these keys! If we can reach Klaneth's den before alarm is raised—stand between me and the priests. Leave the black priest to me! Touch not Gigi, the drummer, nor Zubran, the red beard. They cannot help us—but they have given vow not to fight against us. Remember that, Sigurd, ah—"

The manacles at the Viking's wrists clicked and opened; the lock on the metal belt clicked open, too. He shook his hands free of the chains, reached down and wrenched away the cincture.

Sigurd stood upright, flaxen mane streaming in the wind, clenched hands lifted high.

"Free!" he shouted, "free!"

"Sigurd!" breathed Kenton, and thrust his hands against the shouting mouth. "Be silent, Sigurd! Do you want the pack down on us before we have a chance to move?"

He pressed the dagger of Zachel into his hand.

"Use that!" he said. "It is all you have until you win some better weapon."

"That!" laughed the Viking. "A woman's toy! Nay, blood brother—Sigurd can do better than that!"

He dropped the dagger. He gripped the oar; lifted it out of the thole pins from which it swung. He bent forward sharply, bringing its shaft with terrific force against the side of the port. There was a sharp crackling, a rending of wood. He drew himself back, bringing the oar with the same force against the opposite side of the port. There was another crackling. Then Sigurd drew it in, broken squarely in the middle, a gigantic club all of ten feet long. He gripped it by the splintered end, whirled it round his head, the chains and the dangling manacles spinning like the weighted chains of some ancient battle mace.

"Come!" barked Kenton, and stooped to pick up the dagger.

And now from all the pit came clamor; the slaves straining at their bonds and crying to be freed.

"Free us!" they shrieked. "Loose our chains! We will fight with you!"

And from Sharane's deck came the shrilling of women. Out of the window poured her warrior maids!

No chance now to surprise the black priest! No chance but in battle, fang and claw. His sword and the great club of Sigurd against Klaneth and his pack. And against what else he did not know.

"Quick, Sigurd!" he shouted. "To the deck!"

"I first, blood brother," grunted Sigurd. "Shield to you!" He pushed Kenton aside, rushed past him. Before he could reach the foot of the stairway its top was filled with priests, white-faced, snarling, swords in their hands, and short stabbing spears.

Kenton's foot fell on something that rolled away from beneath it, sending him to his knees. He looked straight down into the grinning face of Zachel. His severed head it was that had tripped him. He lifted it by the hair, swung it round and hurled it straight at the face of the foremost priest at the stairway top. It caught that priest a glancing blow, fell among them, then rolled and bounced away.

They cried out. They shrank back from it. Before they could muster again the Viking was up the steps and charging them, oar club flinging like a flail. And at his heels came Kenton, making for the black cabin's door.

There were eight of the black robes facing them. They realized the meaning of Kenton's move, streamed forward to block it. The Norseman's oar struck, shattering the skull of one like an egg shell. Before he could raise it again two of the priests had darted in upon him, stabbing, thrusting with their spears. Kenton's sword swept down, bit deep into the bone of an arm whose point was touching Sigurd's breast. With quick upward thrust

he ripped the same priest open from navel to chin. The Viking, swift as thought, dropped one hand from the oar, caught the haft of the second spear, twisted it out of the black robe's grip and ran it through his heart. Down went another under bite of Kenton's blade.

But now other priests came streaming from every passageway and corner of the black deck, armed with swords and spears and bearing shields. Out they streamed, screaming to their master.

And out of the black cabin rushed Klaneth, roaring, a great sword in hand. Behind him were Gigi and the Persian. The black priest came straight on, charging like a bull through the half ring of his servitors. But Gigi and the Persian slipped over to the serpent drum, stood there watching. Yet even in that short glimpse Kenton saw that the Persian's eyes were blazing with battle light, his hands running over the daggers at his belt, sheathing and unsheathing his scimitar.

Out of the pit was coming one long sustained shrieking of the slaves.

For an instant the black priest stood towering over Kenton, the phosphorescence in his pale eyes turned now to leaping hell flames. Then he struck downward, a lightning blow designed to cleave Kenton from shoulder to hip.

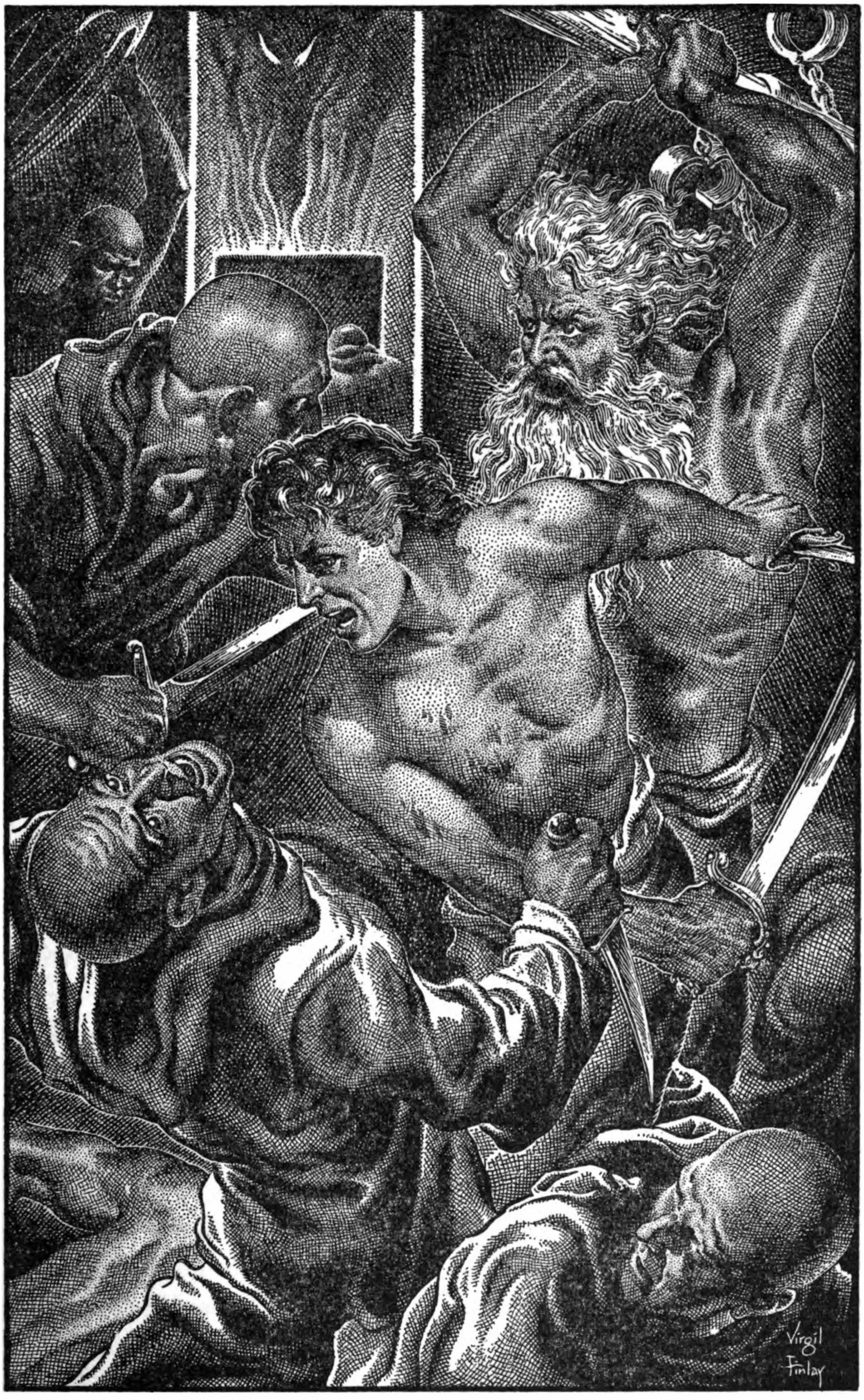
But Kenton was not there when the blow fell. Swifter than the sword of Klaneth he had leaped aside, thrust out his own blade—

Felt it bite deep into the black priest's side!

Klaneth howled and fell back. Instantly his acolytes streamed in between him and the besieged pair. They circled them.

"Back to back, brother!" shouted the Viking. Kenton heard the great club hum, saw three of the black robes mowed down by it as by some giant flail. With sweep and thrust he cleared away the priests ravening at him.

Now the fighting had carried them close to the drum. He saw


Virgil
Finlay

the Persian, scimitar unsheathed and held by rigid arm. And he was cursing, sobbing, quivering like a hound held in leash and held back from his quarry. While Gigi, froth upon the corners of wide open mouth, face contorted, stood with long arms outstretched, hands trembling, shaking with that same eagerness.

Desire, Kenton knew, to join with him and Sigurd in that battle, held back by mysterious vows not to be broken.

And suddenly Gigi pointed downward. Kenton followed the gesture, saw a priest crawling, sword in hand, and almost within reach of the Viking's feet. One sweep of that sword against Sigurd's legs and he was done for; hamstrung. Forgetting his own defense, he leaned forward, cut downward. The head of the creeping priest jumped from his shoulders, rolled away.

But as he straightened he saw Klaneth again above him, poised to strike!

"The end!" thought Kenton. With one last instinctive movement he dropped flat, rolled away from the falling edge.

He had not counted on the Viking. Sigurd had seen all that swift by-play. He swept his oar, held horizontally, in a gigantic punch. It crashed into Klaneth's chest.

The sword stroke fell short; the black priest was hurled backward, half falling for all his strength and massive bulk.

"Gigi! Zubran! To me!" he howled.

Before Kenton could rise, two priests were on him, clawing him, stabbing at him. He released his grip on his sword; drew the poniard of Zachel. He thrust upward; felt a body upon him stiffen, then collapse like a pricked balloon. Felt, too, the edge of a sword slice into his shoulder. He struck again, blindly; was drenched with sudden flood of blood. He heard a bubbling whispering—and the second weight was gone.

He gripped his sword, staggered upright. In one swift glance he saw that of all Klaneth's wolf pack not more than half a dozen were on their feet—and Klaneth himself was one of these.

They had drawn back, out of reach of the Viking's oar. Sigurd stood, drawing in great breaths. And the black priest was gasping too, holding his broad chest where the oar of Sigurd had struck. At his feet was a little pool of blood, dripping from where the sword of Nabu had pierced him.

"Gigi! Zubran!" he panted. "Take these dogs! Or Nergal seize you!"

The drummer leered at him.

"Nay, Klaneth," he answered. "My vow and Zubran's was that we would not molest you nor your priests as long as you were master of this deck. There was no vow to aid you. And it comes to me that your mastership is ending. And therefore—"

He bent over the tall drum, with heave of broad shoulders hurled it over the side.

"And therefore," he grinned, "you will no longer need the Summoner of Nergal!"

From the priests arose a groan. Klaneth stood, silent, struck dumb, it seemed, by Gigi's act; his words.

And as they stood there came from the waves touching the ship a sound—sonorous and sinister!

A thunderous drumming, menacing, malignant—summoning!

Br-oom—rr—oom—oom!

The great drum swinging against the side of the ship! Lifted by the waves and by their arms beaten against the ship!

The—Summoner!

The Summoner of—Nergal!

Br—rr—oom!

The ship trembled. A shadow fell upon the sea. Around Klaneth a darkness began to gather.

More angrily, more evilly, thundered the wave-beaten drum of Nergal. The mists about the black priest thickened, writhed;

beginning that hellish transmutation of Nergal's priest into his own dread self. Out of them came Klaneth's voice.

"Not master, eh—Gigi!" he mocked. "Now wait and see! And see what happens to you and that sow's spittle of a Persian!"

"Strike!" Gigi's hand fell on Kenton's shoulder. "Quick! Bite deep! While there is yet time! I go to silence the Summoner!"

He ran to the rail; dropped over it.

And Kenton rushed straight upon that cloudy horror within which the black priest still moved. His sword swept into it; struck! He heard a howl, agonized, unbelieving. The voice of Klaneth! He struck again.

And striking realized that the drumming had ceased; that the voice of the Summoner was stilled. He heard Gigi's shout:

"Bite again, wolf! Bite deep!"

Abruptly the dark mist around Klaneth cleared. He stood there, dead eyes closed, hand holding an arm from which dark blood welled through clasping fingers.

And as Kenton raised his sword to strike again—to strike this time a blow that would need no other to follow it—the black priest opened eyes that were twin pyres of infernal flame. Into Kenton's eyes he dashed the blood from the hand that had held the wounded arm. Blinded, Kenton held his sword at mid-stroke. The black priest rushed upon him. Mechanically, through dimmed sight, he raised blade to meet that rush; saw Sigurd driving down upon the remaining priests, heard the crack of bone as red-stained mace met their bodies even as they fled.

His sword was caught in Klaneth's hand. Swiftly he drew it back. As it slid out of the black priest's grip, severed fingers dropped. Again he howled.

Kenton's foot slipped on a gout of blood. He fell. The black priest crashed down on him; the mighty arms encircled him. Over and over they rolled. He saw Sigurd, whimpering with

eagerness, striving to strike down; to smash out Klaneth's life—and finding no opening.

Suddenly Klaneth rolled over, Kenton on top of him. His crushing grip relaxed; he grew limp; lay inert.

Kenton knelt upon him; looked up at the Viking.

"Not yours," he gasped. "Mine!"

He sought for the dagger at his belt. The body of the black priest stiffened. Then, like a released spring, he leaped upon his feet, throwing Kenton yards away.

And before the Viking could raise the club to strike, Klaneth was at the rail. He hurled himself over it into the sea!

They hung over the ship's side, Kenton poised to leap upon the black priest. He was not there. They searched with their gaze the waters. Twice perhaps a hundred feet away, the serpent drum floated, its top slit across by Gigi's knife. And now as they watched the head of Klaneth arose beside it, a hand gripped it. Under the touch the huge cylinder dipped to him with grotesque genuflection. From it came a dismal sound like a lament. Then out of the silver haze a shadow moved. It darkened over black priest and drum. It shrouded them and withdrew—and where it had been was neither black priest nor Summoner! Man and drum—all had gone!

Battle fury still in his veins, Kenton looked about him. The black deck was strewn with Klaneth's men; men crushed and broken under Sigurd's mace, men from whom his own sword had let out the life, men in twisted, grotesque heaps, men—but not many—who still writhed and groaned.

He turned to Sharane's deck. Her women, white-faced, clustered at the cabin door, staring at him. And on the very verge of the barrier between the two decks stood Sharane. Proudly she faced him, but with misty eyes on whose long lashes tears still trembled. Diadem of shining crescent was gone; gone too that

aura of the goddess which even when Ishtar was afar lingered like a splendor in this, her living shrine.

Why—she was but a woman after all! Nay—only a girl! A girl all human, exquisite—

He was lifted high on the shoulders of Gigi and the Persian.

"Hail!" cried Gigi. "Hail! Master of the ship!"

"Master of the ship!" shouted the Persian. "Gods of Persia! What a fight!"

"Master of the ship!" repeated Gigi—then softly— "But Klaneth lives!"

Master of the ship!

"Put me down," he ordered. And when they had set him on his feet he strode from Klaneth's deck to Sharane's, stood over her.

"Master of the ship!" he laughed. "And master of—you! Sharane!"

"Not yet," she answered, steadily. "Not yet—unless I choose."

He gripped her slender wrists, drew her to his breast.

Chapter Seventeen

THERE CAME A SHOUT FROM GIGI; A CRY OF WARNING ECHOED by the Persian. He saw Sharane's face pale, her lips grow white. Out of the black cabin strode Sigurd the Viking, and in his arms was that dark statue of cloudy evil that had stood in Klaneth's sinister shrine.

"Stop!" cried Gigi, and sprang toward him. But the Viking had reached the rail. Before the Ninevite could reach him he had lifted the idol and cast it over into the waves.

"The last devil gone!" shouted Sigurd.

But Gigi turned to the Persian, horror on his face. And the Persian shrugged his shoulders, walked to the rail and looked over it down where the black image had been cast.

The ship trembled—trembled as though far beneath its keel a hand had risen and was shaking it.

It stopped. Around it the waters darkened.

Deep, deep down in those darkened waters began to glow a scarlet cloud. Deep, deep beneath them the cloud moved and widened as widens the thunderhead. It vortexed into a great

crimson storm cloud blotted with blacknesses. It floated up; ever growing, its scarlets deepening ever more angrily, its blacks shading ever more menacingly.

The lifting cloud swirled; from it shot out strangely ordered rays, horizontal, fan-shaped. From those slant-planed luminescences now whirling like a tremendous wheel in the abyss, immense bubbles, black and crimson, began to break. They shot up, growing swiftly in girth as they neared the surface.

Within them Kenton glimpsed figures; misty figures; bodies of crouching men clad in armor that glimmered jet and scarlet.

Men within the bubbles!

Armored men! Men who crouched with heads on knees, clothed all in glittering scales. Warriors in whose hands were misty swords, misty bows, misty javelins.

Up rushed the bubble hosts, myriad after myriad. Now they were close to sea surface. Now they broke through.

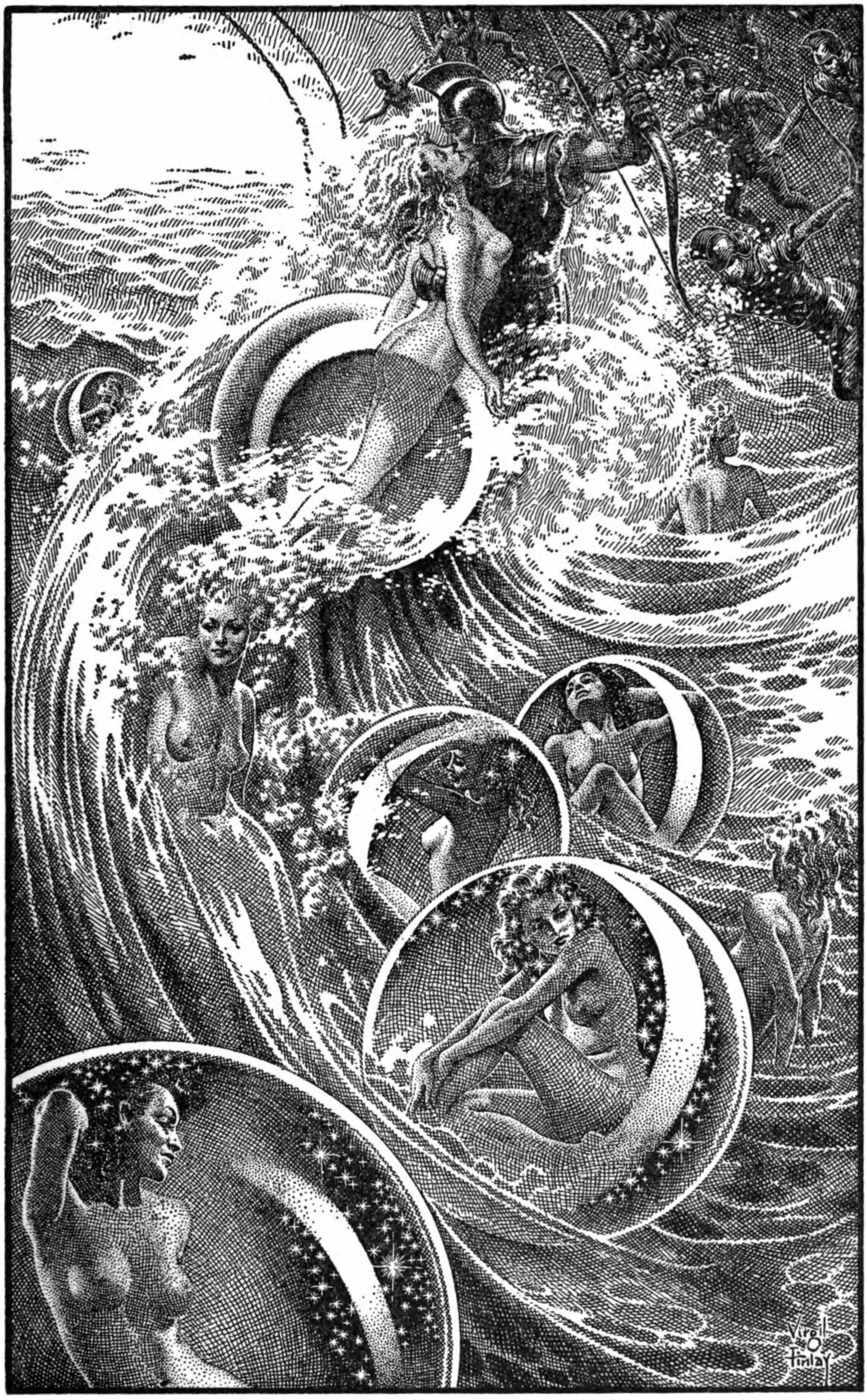
The bubbles burst!

Out of their shattered sides the warriors sprang. All in their checkered mail, pallid-faced, pupilless eyes half closed and dead, they leaned out upon the darkened blue of the sea. From crest to crest of waves they vaulted. They ran over the waters as though over a field of withered violets. Silently they poured down upon the ship!

"Men of Nergal!" wailed Sharane. "Warriors of the Black One! Ishtar! Ishtar—help us!"

"Phantoms!" cried Kenton, and held high his blood stained sword. "Phantoms!"

And instantly he knew that whatever they were—phantoms they were not! The front rank poised themselves upon the tip of a curling wave as though upon a long land barrow. They thrust down bows no longer misty. To their cheeks they drew the tips of long arrows. Came a twang of strings, a pattering as of hail against the sides of the ship. A dozen shafts quivered along the


Virgil O Finlay

side of the mast; one fell at his feet—serpent scaled, black and crimson, its head buried deep within the deck.

"Ishtar! Lady Ishtar! Deliver us from Nergal!" wailed Sharane.

As though in answer the ship leaped as if another hand had closed upon its stern and had thrown it forward!

From the hosts still breaking through the bubbles arose a vast shouting. They raced after the now flying ship; halted. Another rain of arrows fell upon it.

"Ishtar! Lady Ishtar!" sobbed Sharane—now nothing but a frightened girl.

The hovering darkness split. For an instant out of it peered an immense orb circled with garlands of little moons. From it poured silver fire; living, throbbing, jubilant. The pulsing flood struck the sea and melted through it. The shadows closed; the orb was gone.

But the moon flames it had poured still dropped down and down. Up to meet them sparkled other great bubbles all rosy, pearl and silver, shimmering with glints and glimmerings of tenderest nacre, gleamings of mother-of-pearl, cream of roses.

In each of them Kenton sensed a form, a body—wondrous, delicate and delicious; a woman's body from whose beauty the shining sides of the bubbles drew their glory!

Women within the bubbles!

Up rushed the spheres of glamour; they touched the surface of the wan sea. They opened.

Out of them flowed hosts of women. Unclad, save for tresses black as midnight, silvery as the moon, golden as the wheat and poppy red, they stepped from the shimmering pyxes that had borne them upward. They lifted white arms and brown arms, arms shell pink and arms pale amber, beckoning to the rushing, sea-born men-at-arms. Their eyes gleamed like little lakes of jewels—sapphires, blue, black and pale sapphires, velvet jet, sun

stone yellow, witched amber; eyes gray as sword blades beneath winter moons. Round hipped and slender hipped, high breasted and virginal, they swayed upon their wave crests, beckoning, calling to Nergal's warriors.

At their calling—dove sweet, gull plaintive, hawk eager, sweet and poignant—the scaled hosts wavered; halted. The bows that had been drawn dropped; swords splashed; javelins twirled through the deeps. Within their dead eyes a flame sprang forth. A flame of life!

They shouted. They sprang forward. To the women—the ship forgotten!

Wave crests on which mailed warriors raced met crests on which the wondrous women poised. Into the mailed arms the women were swept. For a breath, tresses brown and black, silver as the moon and golden as the wheat, swirled round mail ebon and scarlet.

Then warriors and women melted into the foam behind the racing ship; became one with the jeweled and sparkling wake of it; a wake that rolled and sighed as though it were the soul of amorous seas.

"Ishtar! Mother Beloved!" prayed the Lady Sharane. "To Ishtar—homage!"

"To Ishtar—homage!" echoed Kenton, and bent his knee.

Rising, he caught her to him.

"Sharane!" he breathed. Her soft arms wreathed his neck.

"My lord—I pray you forgiveness," she sighed. "I pray you forgiveness! Yet how could I have known—when first you lay upon the deck and seemed afraid and fled? And then were chained—a slave! And still I loved you! Yet how could I have known how mighty a lord you are?"

Her fragrance shook him; the softness of her against his breath closed his throat.

"Sharane!" he murmured. "Sharane!"

His lips sought hers and clung; mad wine of life raced through his veins; in the sweet flames of her mouth memory of all save this moment threatened to be burned from him.

"I—give myself—to you!" she sighed.

He remembered.

"*You* give nothing, Sharane!" he answered her. "*I*—take!"

He lifted her in his arms.

The Viking came and sat beside the door of the rosy cabin, the black priest's sword in hand. He sat, watchful, chanting low some ancient bridal lay. Upon the black deck Gigi and the Persian moved, casting the bodes of the slain into the sea; ending the pain of those not yet dead; casting them then after the others.

One dove and then another fluttered down from the balcony of the blossoming trees and strutted about the closed door. The Viking watched them, still chanting low. Quick after the first doves fluttered others, twain upon twain. They cooed and bent inquisitive heads; they billed and murmured. They formed a half ring before the closed door.

The white-breasted doves—tender, red-beaked, vermilion-footed; the murmuring, the wooing, the caressing doves—they set their white seal upon the way to Kenton and the woman he had won!

The doves of Ishtar—wedding them.

And now, their work done, Zubran and Gigi stepped over where the barrier had been, jesting with and wooing the women of Sharane.

But, unheeding, Sigurd, Trygg's son, Sigurd the Viking, sat before that barred door, sword ready for hand, chanting under his breath his ancient lay.

And, as unheeding, the doves of Ishtar, silent now, encircled it.

Chapter Eighteen

"DEAR LORD OF MINE—JONKENTON!" WHISPERED SHARANE. "I think that even you do not know how greatly I love you!"

They sat within the rosy cabin, her head upon his breast.

And it was a new John Kenton who looked down upon the lovely face upturned to his. All that had been modern had fallen from him. He had gained in height, and brown as his face was the broad chest bared by open tunic. His blue eyes were clear and fearless, filled with a laughing recklessness, touched, too, with half fierce ruthlessness. Above the elbow of his left arm was a wide bracelet of thin gold, graven with symbols Sharane had cut there. Upon his feet were sandals that Sharane had embellished with woven Babylonian charms—to keep his feet upon a path of love that led to her and her alone.

How long had it been since that battle with the black priest, he wondered, as he drew her closer to him. Eternities it seemed—and but yesterday! How long?

He could not know—in that timeless world where eternities and yesterdays were as one.

And whether yester-moment or eternities ago, he had ceased to care!

On and on they had sailed. And ever as they slipped through the azure seas, memory of that other life of his had dwindled and sunk beneath the horizon of consciousness, as the land sinks behind the watcher on an outward bound ship. He thought of it, when at all, with a numbing fear that he might be thrust back into it again—that old life of his.

Away from the ship! Away from Sharane—never to return!

On and on they had sailed. The black cabin, swept clean of evil, housed now the Viking, Gigi and the Persian. Sigurd or Gigi handled the two great oars that, fastened to each side of the stern, steered the ship. Sometimes, in fair weather, a maid of Sharane's took their place at the rudder bar. And the Viking had found an anvil in the hold under the black cabin; had made a forge and on it hammered out swords. One he had made for Gigi, full nine feet long, that the dwarf legged giant handled like a wand. Better, though, Gigi liked the immense mace that Sigurd had also made for him—long as the sword, with huge bronze ball studded with nails at its end. Zubran clung to his scimitar. But the Viking labored at his forge, beating out lighter brands for Sharane's warrior maids. He made them shields and taught them to use both sword and shield as they had been used on his dragons in the old Viking days.

Part fruit of that instruction, sword play with Sigurd, wrestling with Gigi, fencing with his own blade against the scimitar of Zubran, was Kenton now.

All this Gigi had encouraged.

"No safety while Klaneth lives!" he would croak. "Make the ship strong."

"We have done with Klaneth!" Kenton had said, a little boastfully.

"Not so," Gigi had answered. "He will come with many men. Sooner or later the black priest will come, wolf!"

There had been recent confirmation of this. Soon after his battle Kenton had taken one of the blacks, a Nubian, and set him in Zachel's seat. But this had made them short one slave at the oars. They had met a ship, hailed it, and demanded an oarsman. Its captain had given them one—fearfully, quickly, and had sped away.

"He did not know that Klaneth was no longer here," chuckled Gigi.

But not long ago they had met another ship. Its captain would not halt when hailed and they had been forced to pursue and to fight. It was a small vessel, easily overhauled and easily captured. And that same captain had told them, sullenly, that Klaneth was at Emakhtila, High Priest of a temple of Nergal there, and one of the council of the House of Nergal in the Temple of the Seven Zones. It was, he said, the greatest of all temples. And more, the black priest was high in favor with one he called the Sultan of the Two Deaths—the ruler, so they gathered, of Emakhtila by consent of the priests who were its actual lords.

Klaneth, said the captain, had sent forth word that the Ship of Ishtar was no longer to be feared, that it held no longer either Nergal or Ishtar but only men and women. It was to be sunk when met, but its men and women were to be saved, especially the red-haired woman Sharane, her lover and a man with long, fair hair who had been a slave. For them he offered a reward.

"You and you," he had said, pointing to Kenton and Sigurd. "And had my boat been but a little bigger and my men more, I would have claimed that reward," he had ended, bluntly.

They took what they wanted from him and let him go. But as the ship drew away, he shouted to them to take what joy of life they could at once, since Klaneth in a great ship and with

many men was even now searching for them and their shift was apt to be short!

"Ho-ho!" grunted Gigi, and— "Oh-ho! Klaneth searches for us, does he? Well, I warned you he would, wolf! What now?"

"Make for one of the isles, pick our vantage ground and let him come," answered Kenton. "We can build a fort, raise defenses. Better chance we would have against him then than on the Ship of Ishtar—if it be true that he pursues us in a great vessel with many soldiers."

They had found Kenton's word good, and now they were sailing toward such an isle, Sigurd at the helm, Gigi and the Persian and the women of Sharane on watch, alert.

"Yea—dear lord of me—even you do not know how greatly I love you," whispered Sharane again, eyes soft and worshiping, arms fettering his neck, pressing him half savagely to her breast. His lips clung to hers. Even in the sweet fire of their touch he marvelled, blind to his own *renaissance*, at this changed Sharane — Love's changeling since that time he had carried her within his bower, disdaining her as gift, taking her by right of his two strong arms.

Swift memories shook him; of Sharane—conquered; of some unearthly wonder that had flamed over the shrine he had thought untenanted and with fingers of pure fire weaving his soul with hers in threads of flaming ecstasies!

Sharane, times past a vase for Ishtar—and now so human!

"Tell me, lord of me—how much you love me," she murmured, languorously.

There came a shout from Sigurd:

"Waken the slaves! Drop oars! Storm comes!"

Imperceptibly, the cabin had darkened. He heard the shrilling of the overseer's whistle, a shouting and patter of feet. He unclasped Sharane's arms; gave her one kiss that answered her questioning better than words; passed out upon the deck.

Swiftly the sky blackened. There was a splintering flash of the prismatic lightning, a clashing of cymbaled thunder. A wind arose and roared. Down came the sail. Before the blast, held steady by the hands of Sigurd, the ship flew.

Then fell the rain. Through it scudded the ship, hemmed in by blacknesses which when the lightnings fell were threaded by myriads of multi-colored serpents of glass, rain streaming like slender serpents of glass from sky to sea and glistening under the lightning flares.

A tremendous gust of wind swept down upon the ship, careening her far over. It buffeted at Sharane's door; tore it open. Kenton staggered over to Gigi, shouted to the women to leave their watch, go inside. He watched them stumble in.

"Zubran and I will watch," he cried in Gigi's ear. "Go you and help Sigurd at the helm."

But Gigi had not gone a yard before the wind died as quickly as though a gigantic screen had been dropped before it.

"To the right!" he heard Sigurd shout. "Look to the right!"

To the starboard rail the three ran. Within the darkness was a broad faint disk of luminescence, like a far away searchlight in a fog. Rapidly its diameter decreased, growing ever brighter as its size diminished.

The disk burst out of the mists; it became a blazing beam that shot over the rushing waves and glared upon the ship. Kenton glimpsed double banks of oars that drove a huge bulk down upon them with prodigious speed. Beneath the light was a gleaming ram, lance tipped. It jutted out from the prow like the horn on a charging rhinoceros.

"Klaneth!" roared Gigi, and ran shouting to the black cabin, Zubran at his heels.

"Sharane!" shouted Kenton, and raced to her door.

The ship veered abruptly, careening until the sea poured over the port rail. Kenton's feet flew from under him; he rolled head

over heels to the bulwarks; struck and lay for an instant stunned.

Sigurd's maneuver could not save the ship. The *bireme* had changed course, swept down parallel with it to shear off its starboard bank of oars. The Viking had thought to escape the impact. But the attacking vessel's oarsmen were too many, its speed too great for the Ship of Ishtar's single banks of seven. Down dipped the *bireme's* sweeps, checking its rush. It swung broadside on straight against the ship, crushing the starboard oars like sticks!

Kenton reeled to his feet; saw Gigi leaping down to him, battle mace in hand; beside him Zubran, scimitar shining. And close behind them, the useless tiller abandoned, was Sigurd the Viking, shields under arm, his great sword held high.

They were beside him. His giddiness was gone. The Viking thrust him a shield. He drew his own sword.

"To Sharane!" he gasped. Forward they ran.

Before they could reach her door, defend it, a score of soldiers, chain mailed and armed with short swords, had poured down the side of the *bireme* and closed the way to the cabin. And behind them poured other scores.

Out whirled Gigi's giant mace, striking them down. Blue blade of Nabu, scimitar of Zubran, brand of Sigurd rose and fell, struck and thrust. In a breath were dripping red!

Yet not a step could they advance! For every soldier they slew, another took his place. And still the *bireme* rained men!

An arrow whistled, stood quivering in Sigurd's shield. Another flew and hung from Zubran's shoulder.

Came the bellowing of Klaneth:

"No arrows! Take the black-haired dog and yellow-hair alive! Slay the others—if you must—with swords!"

Now the fighting men from the *bireme* were all around them. Back to back in hollow square the four fought. Upon the deck the mail clad men fell. Steadily growing mounds of dead around

them, they fought on. There was a sword gash across Gigi's hairy chest from which blood ran in little trickling streams. The Viking was bleeding from a dozen cuts. But Zubran, save for the arrow wound, was untouched. He fought silently, but Sigurd chanted and howled as he struck and Gigi laughed as his giant mace crushed bone and sinew.

Yet still the barrier of the black priest's men held fast between them and Sharane!

What of Sharane! His heart leaped. He cast a swift glance up at the balcony. She stood there with three of her warrior maids, swords in hand, battling against soldiers who crept two by two down a narrow bridge of planks that had been dropped from the *bireme's* deck.

But that glance had been no wise one. A sword bit into his unguarded side, paralyzing him. He would have fallen but for the Viking's hand.

"Steady, blood-brother!" he heard him say. "My shield is before you. Take breath!"

There came a triumphant shouting from the ship of Klaneth. Out from its deck two long poles had been thrust. There had been a tugging of ropes and from their ends a net had fallen—squarely over Sharane and her three women!

Vainly they were struggling within it to cut the meshes. It bound them, fettered them. They beat against it as helplessly as butterflies.

And suddenly the net tightened, was drawn together by cords. Slowly the poles began to lift, carrying the net's burden upward to the deck of the attacking ship!

"Ho! Sharane!" mocked Klaneth. "Ho! Vessel of Ishtar! Welcome to my ship!"

"God!" groaned Kenton. Strength renewed and doubled by his fury and despair, he charged. Before his berserk onslaught the warriors gave way. Again he rushed. Something whirled

through air; struck him upon the temple. He fell. The men of Klaneth swarmed upon him, clutching at his hands, his feet, smothering him.

They were hurled from him. The dwarf legs of Gigi stood astride of him, his mace whistling, men dropping under its stroke. Dizzily he raised his head; saw Sigurd guarding him at right, Zubran at left and rear.

He looked upward. The net that held the struggling women was being dropped upon the *bireme's* deck.

Again he heard the bellow of Klaneth:

"Welcome, sweet Sharane! Welcome!"

He staggered up, broke from the Viking's grip, staggered forward—toward her.

"Seize him!" came the howl of the black priest. "His weight in gold to the men who bring him to me—alive!"

And now there was a ring of Klaneth's men around him, sweeping him away. Between him and the three who had fought beside him eddied another stream of warriors, falling, smitten by mace and sword and scimitar—but their places taken by others; others wedging in, widening steadily the distance between Kenton and his comrades.

He ceased to struggle. After all—this was what he wanted! This was best. He would be with Sharane! Could find some plan to defeat again the black priest!

"Hold him up!" roared Klaneth. "Let the drab of Ishtar see him!"

He was lifted high in the hands of his captors. He heard a wail from Sharane.

A dizziness seized him! It was as though he had been caught in some vortex and been sucked away—away!

He had a vision of Sigurd, the Persian and Gigi staring at him, their faces incredulous, bloody masks. And they had stopped fighting. There were other faces, scores of them, staring at him

with that same incredulity—though now, it seemed, shaded with terror.

Now they were all staring at him as though over the edge of a prodigious funnel through which he had begun to drop!

And now the clutching hands had melted away from him! The faces were gone.

There was a wild whirling. Down, down through the vortex he was drawn with appalling speed. He threw out his arms, striving to stop his flight.

"Gigi!" he called. "Sigurd! Zubran! Help me!"

Again he heard the howling of vast winds!

They changed into a trumpet note. The trumpeting changed. It became some familiar sound—some sound known in another life of his, ages and ages agone! What was it? Louder it grew. rasping, peremptory—

The shriek of an auto horn!

Shuddering, heartsick, he opened his eyes, looked upon his own room! There lay the shining jeweled ship—the ship of toys!

And there was a knocking at the door, agitated, frantic; the murmuring of frightened voices.

Then the voice of Jevins, faltering, panic stricken:

"Master John! Master John!"

Chapter Nineteen

KENTON FOUGHT BACK HIS FAINTNESS; REACHED OUT A trembling hand, and snapped on the electrics.

"Master John! Master John!"

The old servant's voice was now sharp with terror; he rattled the door knob; beat against the panels.

Kenton steadied himself against the table; forced himself to speak.

"Why—Jevins—" he strove to lighten the dragging words, inject some naturalness into them— "What's the matter?"

He heard a little gasp of relief, another murmuring from the servants and then Jevins spoke again.

"I was passing and heard you cry out, sir. A dreadful cry! Are you ill?"

Fiercely Kenton strove against the racking weakness; managed a laugh.

"Why, no—I fell asleep. Had a nightmare and woke up yelling. Don't worry! Go to bed."

"Oh—it was that?"

The relief in Jevins's voice was greater, but the doubt was not altogether gone. He did not withdraw; stood there hesitating.

There was a mist before Kenton's eyes, a thin veil of crimson. His knees bent suddenly; barely he saved himself from falling. He stumbled to the couch and sank upon it. A panic impulse urged him to cry out to Jevins to bring help—to break down the door. Fast upon it came the inexplicable warning that he must not do this thing; that he must fight his battle out alone—if he were to tread the ship's deck again!

"Go, Jevins!" he cried harshly. "Hell, man—didn't I tell you I wasn't to be disturbed tonight? Get away!"

Too late he realized that never before had he spoken so to this old servant who loved him, he knew, like a son. Had he betrayed himself—crystallized Jevins's vague suspicions into certainty that within that room something was wrong indeed? Fear spurred his tongue.

"I'm all right!" He forced laughter into the words. "Of course, I'm all right! And I didn't mean to speak so nastily. Forgive me!"

Damn that mist in front of his eyes! What was it? He passed a hand over them, brought it away wet with blood. He stared at it, stupidly.

"Oh, that's all right, sir—" There was no more doubt, nothing but affection in the voice. "But hearing you cry—"

God! Would the man never go! His eyes traveled from his hand up his arm. Crimson it was, red with blood to the shoulder. The fingers dripped.

"Only a devilish nightmare," he interrupted quietly. "I won't sleep again until I'm done and go to bed—so run along."

"Then—good night, Master John."

"Good night," he answered. Swaying dizzily, he sat until the footsteps of Jevins and the others had died away. Then he tried to rise. His weakness was too great. He slid from the couch to

his knees, crawled across the floor to a low cabinet, fumbled at its doors and drew down a bottle of whisky. He raised it to his lips and drank deep. The fiery stuff raced through him, gave him strength. He arose.

A sickening pang stabbed his side. He raised his hand to clutch the agony, covered it and felt trickle through his fingers a slow, warm stream!

He remembered—a sword had bitten him there—the sword of one of Klaneth's men!

Flashed before him pictures—the arrow quivering in the Viking's shield, the mace of Gigi, the staring warriors, the great net dropping over Sharane and her women, the wondering, incredulous, terror-filled faces.

Then—this!

Again he lifted the bottle. Half way to his mouth he stopped, every muscle rigid, every nerve taut. Confronting him was a shape—a man splashed red from head to foot! He saw a strong, fierce face from which glared eyes filled with murderous menace; long tangled elf locks of black writhed round it down to the crimson-stained shoulders. From hair edge to ear down across the forehead was a wound, from which blood dripped. Bare to the waist was this man and from the nipple of the left breast to mid-side ran a red wide-mouthed slash, open to the ribs!

Gory, menacing, dreadful in its red lacquer of life, a living phantom from some pirate deck of death it glared at him.

Stop! There was something familiar about the face—the eyes! His gaze was caught by a shimmer of gold on the right arm, above the elbow. It was a bracelet. And he knew that bracelet—

It was twin to that which circled his own left arm!

The bridal gift of Sharane!

Who was this man? He could not think clearly—how could he—with numbness in his brain, the red mists before his eyes, this weakness that was creeping stealthily back upon him?

Sudden rage swept through him. He swung the bottle to hurl straight at the wild, fierce face.

The left hand of the figure swung up, clutching a similar bottle!

What he saw was himself!

It was he, John Kenton, reflected in the long mirror on the wall. That ensanguined, fearfully wounded raging shape was—himself!

A clock chimed nine.

As though the slow strokes had been an exorcism, a change came over Kenton. His mind cleared, purpose and will clicked back in place. He took another deep drink of the liquor, and without another look in the mirror, without a glance toward the jeweled ship, he walked to the door.

Hand on the key he paused, considering. No, that would not do. He could not risk going out into the hallway. Jevins might still be hovering near; or some of the other servants might see him. And if he had not known himself, what would be the effect of seeing him on them?

He could not go where water was to cleanse his hurts, wash away the blood. He must do with what was here.

He turned back to the cabinet, stripping the table of its cloths as he passed. His foot struck something on the floor. The blade of Nabu lay there, no longer blue but stained as was he from tip of blade to hilt. For the moment he left it lie. He poured spirits upon the cloth, made shift to cleanse himself with them. From another cabinet he drew out his emergency medical kit. There was lint there and bandages and iodine. Stiff-lipped with the torture of its touch, he poured the latter into the great wound in his side, daubed it into the cut across his forehead. He made compresses of the lint and wound the linen tapes round brow and chest. The blood flow stopped. The flaming agony of the iodine

diminished. He stepped again to the mirror and scanned himself.

The clock struck the half hour.

Half past nine! What had it been when he had clutched the golden chains of the ship—had summoned the ship and been lifted by those chains out of the room and into the mysterious world in which it sailed?— Just eight o'clock!

Only an hour and a half ago! Yet during that time in that other and timeless world he had been slave and conqueror, had fought great fights, had won both ship and the woman who had mocked him, had become—what now he was!

And all this in less than two short hours!

He walked over to the ship, picking up the sword as he went. He wiped the hilt clean of blood, the blade he did not touch. He drained the bottle before he dared drop his eyes.

He looked first on Sharane's cabin. There were gaps in the little blossoming trees. The door was down, flung broken on the deck. The casements of the window were shattered. Upon the roof's edge a row of doves perched, heads a-droop, mourning.

From the oar ports four sweeps instead of seven dipped on each side. And in the pit were no longer the eight and twenty rowers. Only ten were left, two to each of the stroke oars, one each to the others. On the starboard side of the hull were gashes and deep dents—the marks of the *bireme's* combing of the Ship of Ishtar now sailing somewhere on that unknown sea of that unknown world from which he had fallen!

And at the tiller bar a manikin stood—a toy steering the toy ship. A toy man, long haired, fair haired. At his feet sat two other toys; one with shining, hairless head, and apelike arms; the other red bearded, agate eyed, a shining scimitar across his knees.

These—toys!

Sigurd, whose blood brotherhood had been sealed by the red

runes on his own back—red runes now healed into white ones? Gigi, the subtle one and silencer of the Summoner? Zubran, who had fought back to back with him against Klaneth's hordes?

These three toys?

No toys these! Not at least upon that real ship of which this upon which he gazed was shadow, symbol—what?

Longing shook him, heart ache, such homesickness as some human soul might feel marooned upon alien star on outskirts of space.

"Gigi!" he groaned. "Sigurd! Zubran! Bring me back to you!"

He bent over the three, touching them with tender fingers, breathing on them, as though to give them warmth of life. Long he paused over Gigi—instinctively he felt that in the Ninevite more than the others dwelt power to help. Sigurd was strong, the Persian subtle—but in the dwarf-legged giant ran tide of earth gods in earth's shouting youth; archaic, filled with unknown power long lost to man.

He concentrated all his will upon that—toy—which in that other world was Gigi; Gigi living, breathing, longing he knew for his return even as he agonized with that same desire.

"Gigi!" he whispered, face close—and again and again—"Gigi! Hear me! Gigi!"

Did the toy move?

Breaking his passion of concentration came a cry. Newsboys shouting some foolish happening of importance on this foolish world on which he was castaway! It broke the threads, shattered the fragile links that he had felt forming between himself and the manikin. Cursing, he straightened. His sight dimmed; he fell. Effort had told upon him; the treacherous weakness crept back. He dragged himself to the cabinet, knocked the head off a second bottle, let half of it pour down his throat.

The sudden whipped blood sang in his ears; strength flowed through him. He snapped off the lights. A ray from the street

came through the heavy curtains, outlining the three toy figures. Once more Kenton gathered himself for a mighty effort of will.

"Gigi! It is I! The wolf! Calling you! Gigi! Answer me! Gigi!"

The manikin stirred, its body trembled, its head raised!

Far, far away, thin and cold as tip of frost lance upon glass, ghostly and unreal, coming from immeasurable distances, he heard Gigi's voice:

"Wolf! I hear you! Wolf! Where are you?"

His mind clung to that thread of sound as though it were a line flung to him over vast abysses.

"Wolf—come to us!" The voice was stronger.

"Gigi! Gigi! Help me to you!"

The two voices—that far flung, thin, cold one and his own met and clung and knit. They stretched over that gulf that lay between where he stood and the unknown dimension in which sailed the ship.

Now the little figure no longer squatted! It was upright! It was larger! Louder rang Gigi's voice:

"Wolf! Come to us! We hear you! Come to us!"

Then as though it chanted words of power:

"Sharane! Sharane! Sharane!"

Under the lash of the loved name his will now streamed fiercely.

"Gigi! Gigi! Keep calling!"

Now he was no longer conscious of his room. He saw the ship —far, far beneath him. He was but a point of life floating high above it, yearning to it and calling, calling to Gigi to help him.

The strand of sound that linked them strained and shook like a cobweb thread. But it held and ever drew him down.

And now the ship was growing. It was misty, nebulous; but steadily it grew and steadily Kenton dropped down that rope of sound to meet it. Strengthening the two voices came other

sounds weaving themselves within their threads—the chanting of Sigurd, the calling of Zubran, the thrumming of the fingers of the wind on the harpstring of the ship's stays, the murmuring litany of the breaking waves telling their beads of foam.

Even more real grew the ship. Striking through its substance came the wavering image of his room. It seemed to struggle against the ship, to strive to cover it. But the ship beat it back, crying out to him with the voices of his comrades and the voices of wind and sea in one.

"Wolf! We feel you near! Come to us, wolf—Sharane! Sharane! Sharane!"

The phantom outlines leaped into being; they enclosed him. The arms of Gigi reached out to him, gripped him, plucked him out of space!

And as they gripped, he heard a chaotic whirling, a roaring, as of another world spinning from under him and lashed by mighty winds.

He stood again upon the ship. He was clasped tight to Gigi's hairy chest. Sigurd's hands were on his shoulders. Zubran was clasping and patting Kenton's own hands clutching Gigi's back, singing in his joy strange intricate Persian curses.

"Wolf!" roared Gigi, tears filling the furrows of his wrinkled face. "Where did you go? In the name of all the gods—where have you been?"

"Never mind!" sobbed Kenton. "Never mind where I've been, Gigi! I'm back! Oh, thank God, I'm back! I'm back!"

Chapter Twenty

FAINTNESS CONQUERED HIM. THE WOUNDS AND THE EFFORT of will had sapped his strength to its limit. When he came back to consciousness he was on the divan in Sharane's raped cabin. His bandages had been replaced, his wounds redressed. The three men and four of Sharane's maids were looking down upon him. There was no reproach on any of their faces—only curiosity, tempered with obvious awe.

"It must be a strange place to which you go, wolf," Gigi said at last. "For see! The slash across my chest is healed, Sigurd's cuts, too—yet your wounds are as fresh as though made but a moment ago."

Kenton looked and saw that it was so; the slash across Gigi's breast was now only a red scar.

"Also it was a strange way to leave us, blood-brother," rumbled the Viking.

"By the fire of Ormuzd!" swore the Persian. "It was a very good way! A good thing for us that he left as he did. Cyrus the King taught us that it was a good general who knew how to re-

treat to save his troops. And that retreat of yours was a masterly one, comrade. Without it we would not be here now to welcome you."

"It was no retreat! I could not help but go!" whispered Kenton.

"Well," the Persian shook a dubious head, "whatever it was, it saved us. One instant there you were lifted on the paws of the black priest's dogs. Another instant you had faded into a shadow. And then, lo, even the shadow was gone!

"How those dogs who had held you shrieked and ran," laughed Zubran. "And the dogs who were biting at us ran too—back to their kennels on the *bireme* they ran, for all Klaneth's cursing! They had great fear, comrade—and so in fact for a moment did I. Then down went their oars, and away sped their ship with Klaneth's cursing still sounding even after they had gotten safely out of sight of us."

"Sharane!" groaned Kenton. "What did they do to her? Where have they taken her?"

"To Emakhtila, on Sorcerers' Isle, I think," answered Gigi. "Fear not for her, wolf. The black priest wants you both. To torture her without your eyes looking on, or to slay you without hers beholding your agonies would be no revenge for Klaneth. No—until he lays hands on you Sharane is safe enough."

"Not comfortable, perhaps, nor happy, but assuredly safe enough," confirmed the Persian.

"Three of her maids they took with her in the nets," said Sigurd. "Three they slew. These four they left when you vanished."

"They took Satalu, my little vessel of joy," mourned Gigi. "And for that Klaneth shall also pay when reckoning comes."

"Half the slaves were killed when the *bireme* crashed against us," went on the Viking. "Oars crushed in ribs, broke backs. Others died later. The black-skin we put in Zachel's place is

a man! He fought those who dropped into the pit and slew his share. But eight oars have we now instead of twice seven. The black-skin sits at one of them—unchained. When we take new slaves he shall be overseer again and honored."

"And I remember now," it was Gigi, dropping back to his first thought; "that when I dragged you up the side of Klaneth's cabin that day you fought his priests, you still bled from the bites of Sharane's girls. Yet with us there had been time and time again for them to have healed. And here you are once more with old wounds fresh. It must be a strange place indeed, that you go to, wolf—is there no time there?"

"It is your own world," he answered. "The world from whence all of you came."

And as they stared at him, he leaped up from the divan.

"We must sail to this Emakhtila! At once! Find Sharane! Free her! How soon, Gigi? How soon?"

He felt the wound in his side open, fell back, his spurt of strength exhausted.

"Not till your wounds are healed," said Gigi, and began to unfasten the reddening bandages. "And we must make the ship strong again before we take that journey. We must have new slaves for the oars. Now lie quiet, wolf, until you heal. Klaneth will do Sharane no harm as long as there is hope of taking you. I, Gigi, tell you this. So set your heart at ease."

And now began for Kenton a most impatient time of waiting. To be chained here by his wounds when, despite Gigi's assurances, the black priest might be wreaking his ultimate vengeance upon Sharane! It was not to be borne. Fever set in. His wounds had been more serious than he had known. Gigi nursed him.

The fever passed, and as he grew stronger he told them of that lost world of theirs; what had passed there during those

centuries they had sailed on the timeless ship; of its machinery and its wars, its laws and its customs.

"And none now goes viking!" mused Sigurd. "Clearly then I see that there is no place for me there. Best for Sigurd, Trygg's son to end his days where he is."

The Persian nodded.

"And no place for me," he echoed. "For a man of taste such as I, it seems no world at all to live in. And I like not your way of waging wars, nor could I learn to like it—I who seem to be a soldier of an old, old school, indeed."

Even Gigi was doubtful.

"I do not think I would like it," he said. "The customs seem so different. And I notice, wolf, that you were willing to risk chains and death to get out of that world—and lose no time getting back to this."

"The new gods seem so stupid," argued Zubran. "They do nothing. By the Nine Hells, the gods of this place are stupid enough—still they do something. Although perhaps it is better to do nothing than to do the same stupid things over and over," he ruminated.

"I will make me a steading on one of these islands," said Sigurd, "after we have carried away Kenton's woman and slain the black priest. I will take me a strong wife and breed many younglings. I will teach them to build ships. Then we shall go viking as I did of old. Skoal! Skoal to the dragons slipping through Ran's bath with the red ravens on their sails and the black ones flying overhead!" shouted Sigurd.

"Say, blood-brother," he turned to Kenton, "when you have your woman back will you make steading beside mine? With Zubran taking wives and he and Gigi—if he be not too old—breeding young, and with those who will join us—by Odin, but we could all be great Jarls in this world!"

"That is not to my liking," replied the Persian promptly.

"For one thing; it takes too long to rear strong sons to fight for us. No—after we have finished our business with Klaneth I will go back to Emakhtila where there are plenty of men already made. It will be strange if I find there no discontented ones, men who can be stirred to revolt. If there be not enough of them—well, discontent is the easiest thing in the world to breed; much easier than sons, Sigurd. Also I am a great soldier. Cyrus the King himself told me so. With my army of discontented men I shall take this nest of priests and rule Emakhtila myself! After that—beware how you raid my ships, Sigurd!"

Thus they talked among themselves, telling Kenton things of their own lives as strange to him as his own tales must have been to them. Steadily, swiftly his wounds healed until they were at last only red welts, and strength flowed back in his veins.

Now for many sleeps, while he grew well, they had lain hidden within a land-locked cove of one of the golden isles. Its rock-jawed mouth had been barely wide enough for them to enter. Safe enough this place seemed from pursuit or prying eyes. Nevertheless they had drawn the ship close against a high bank whose water side dropped straight down to the deep bottom. The oars had been taken in. The branches of the feathery trees drooped over the craft; covered it.

Came a time when Kenton, awakening, felt full tide of health. He walked back to the rudder bar where Sigurd, Gigi and the Persian were stretched out talking. He paused for the hundredth time beside the strange compass that was the helmsman's guide in this world, where there was neither sun nor moon nor stars; no east or west, north or south. Set within the top of a wooden standee was a silver bowl covered with a sheet of clear crystal. Around the lip of this bowl were inlaid sixteen symbols, cuneiform, scarlet. Attached to a needle rising vertically from the bowl's bottom were two slender pointers, serpent shaped, blue.

The larger, he knew, pointed always toward Emakhtila, that land to which, were Gigi right, Sharane had been carried by the black priest. The smaller pointed toward the nearest land.

For the hundredth time he wondered what mysterious currents stirred them in this poleless world; what magnetic flow from the scattered isles pulled the little one; what constant flow from Emakhtila kept the big one steady. Steadier far than compass needles of earth pointed to the north.

And as he looked it seemed to him that the little blue needle spun in its scarlet pool and lay parallel with the greater one—both pointing to the Isle of Sorcerers!

"An omen!" he cried. "Look, Sigurd! Gigi—Zubran—look!"

They bent over the compass. But in the instant between his call and their response the smaller needle had shifted again; again pointed to the isle where they lay moored!

"An omen?" they asked, puzzled. "What omen?"

"Both the needles pointed to Emakhtila!" he told them. "To Sharane! She is in danger. It was an omen—a summons! We must go! Quick, Gigi—Sigurd—cast loose! We sail for Emakhtila!"

They looked at him, doubtfully; down at the compass once more; at each other covertly.

"I saw it, I tell you!" Kenton repeated. "It was no illusion—I am well! Sharane is in peril! We must go!"

"Sh-h-h!" Gigi held up a warning hand; listened intently; parted the curtain of the leaves and peered out.

"A ship," he whispered, drawing back his head. "And coming in. Bid the maids get arrows and javelins. Arm—all of you. Quiet now—and speed!"

They could hear the dip of oars; voices; the low tapping of a hammer, beating the stroke for the rowers. The maids of Sharane silently ranged themselves along the port rail near the bow,

bows standing, arrows at strings, beside them their stabbing javelins, their swords, too; their shields at feet.

The four men crouched, peeping out through the trees. What was coming? Questing ship of Klaneth that had nosed them out? Hunters searching the seas for them spurred on by the black priest's promises of reward?

Through the narrow entrance to the hidden harbor drifted a galley. Twice the length of the ship, it was single tiered, fifteen oars to the side and double banked—two men to each sweep. There were a dozen or more men standing on the bow deck; how many others not visible there was no knowing. The galley crept in. It nosed along the shore. When less than two hundred feet away from the hidden watchers grapnels were thrown over the side and the boat made fast.

"Good water here, and all we need," they heard one say.

Gigi put his arms around the three, drew them close to him.

"Wolf," he whispered, "now do I believe in your omen. For lo! close upon its heels follows another and a better one. A summons indeed! There are the slaves we must have for our vacant oars! And gold too, I'll warrant, that we shall want when we reach Emakhtila."

"Slaves and gold, yes," muttered Kenton; then sardonically as half a dozen more men came up from below and joined the group on the bow—"Only remains to find the way to take them, Gigi."

"Nay, but that will be easy," whispered Zubran. "They suspect nothing, and men surprised are already half beaten. I have a plan. We four will creep along the bank until we are just opposite their bow. When we have been away for as long as Zala there—" he motioned to one of the warrior maids—"can count two hundred, the maids shall pour their arrows into that group, shooting fast as they can but taking careful aim and bringing down as many as they can. Then we will leap aboard and upon

those left. But when the maids hear us shout they must shoot no longer at the bow, lest we be struck. Thereafter let them keep any others from joining those forward. Is it a good plan? I'll warrant we shall have their ship in less time than it has taken me to tell it."

A qualm shook Kenton.

"I like not this killing of men in cold blood," he said.

"Now by the gods!" came the voice, evidently of the captain of the galley. "Would that cursed Ship of Ishtar had been here. Had it been—well, I think none of us would need go faring out of Emakhtila again. Gods! If we might only have crept up on her here and won Klaneth's rewards!"

Kenton's compunction fled; here were the hunters, and delivered into the hands of the hunted.

"Right, Zubran," he whispered fiercely. "Beckon Zala to us and tell her the plan."

And when that had been done he led them over the side of the ship into the covert. There was a ledge that helped them in their going and it seemed to Kenton, watching hungrily the craft that, won, might mean Sharane, that the maids' arrows would never fly.

At last they came, buzzing like bees and swarming among the cluster of men on the strange ship. And the maids were aiming straight. Of the near score fully half were down, spitted, before they broke for shelter, crying crazily. Kenton shouted and leaped upon the deck, cutting with his sword, while the mace of Gigi threatened and the blade of Sigurd, the scimitar of Zubran took toll. Beaten ere they could raise a hand, those left alive knelt and cried for mercy. A little band running to their aid from the stern met arrow storm from the maids, threw down their arms, raised hands of submission.

They herded their captives together, disarmed them and thrust them into the forward cabin. They locked them in, first

making sure there were no weapons there and no way for them to escape. They took the keys to the rowers' chains. The Viking went down into the pit, picked out nineteen of the sturdiest slaves, loosed and drove them two by two over to the ship. He manacled them to its empty oars.

Much gold they found, too, and other things that might prove useful in Emakhtila—clothes of seamen in the fashion of the place, long robes to cover them and make them less open to detection.

Arose then the question of what was to be done with their prize—and the men aboard her. Gigi was for putting them all to the sword. The Persian thought that it would be best to bring back the slaves, leave the ship where she was, and after killing all those on the captive galley, put forth to Emakhtila on her. There was much in his plan to be commended. The Ship of Ishtar was a marked vessel. There was no mistaking her. This other ship would arouse no suspicion in the minds of those who saw it sailing. And once landed at Emakhtila, and what lay before them done, they could sail back on it and recover the ship.

But Kenton would not have it. And the upshot was that the captain was called out for questioning and told that if he answered truthfully his life and those of the others would be spared.

There was little he could tell them—but that little was enough to quicken Kenton's heart—bring new dread to it also. Yes, there had been a woman brought to Emakhtila by Klaneth, the Priest of Nergal. He had won her in a fight, Klaneth had said, a sea battle in which many men had been slain. He had not said where, or with whom this battle had taken place, and his soldiers had been warned to be silent. But it began to be whispered that the woman was the woman of the Ship of Ishtar. The priestesses of Ishtar had claimed her. But Klaneth who had great power had resisted them, and as a compromise the Council of

Priests had made her priestess of the God Bel and placed her in Bel's House on top of the Temple of the Seven Zones.

"I know that Temple and the House of Bel on top of it," Sigurd had nodded. "And why its priestess must live there," he had whispered, looking with pitying eyes at Kenton.

This woman appeared now and then, heavily veiled, attending certain ceremonies to the God Bel, the captain went on. But she seemed to be a woman in a dream. Her memory had been taken from her—or so it was whispered. Beyond that he knew nothing—except that Klaneth had doubled his reward for three of them—he pointed to Gigi, Sigurd, and the Persian; and had trebled it for him—he pointed to Kenton.

And yes, now he remembered the name of this new priestess. It was Sharane!

When they were done with him they unloosed the remaining slaves and sent them ashore. They hailed the ship and the Nubian brought her over. They watched the captain and his men pass over the side of the galley and disappear among the trees.

"Plenty of water and food," grumbled Gigi. "They fare far better at our hands than we would have fared at theirs."

They hitched the captured galley to the ship; slowly pulled it out of the harbor through the rock-lipped mouth. And after they had gone a mile or so, Sigurd dropped into it, did a few things with an axe, and climbing back cut it loose. Rapidly the galley filled and sank.

"Now," cried Kenton, and took the rudder bar, steering the ship straight to where the long blue serpent pointed.

Pointed to Emakhtila and to—

Sharane!

Chapter Twenty-One

LUCK CLUNG TO THEM. THE SILVER MISTS HUNG CLOSE ABOUT the ship, shrouding her so that she sailed ever within a circle not more than double her length. Ever the mists hid her. Kenton, sleeping little, drove the slaves at the oars to point of exhaustion.

"There is a great storm brewing," warned Sigurd.

"Pray Odin that it may hold back till we are well within Emakhtila," answered Kenton.

"If we but had a horse I would sacrifice it to the All-Father," mourned Sigurd. "Then he would hold that storm till our needs called it."

"Speak low, lest the sea horses trample us!" warned Kenton, half laughing, half serious.

He had questioned the Viking about that interruption of his when the captain of the captured galley had said that Sharane was Priestess of Bel's House. The Viking had been subtly evasive.

"She will be safe there, even from Klaneth—so long as she takes no other lover than the god," Sigurd had said.

"No other lover than the god!" Kenton had roared, hand dropping to sword and glaring at Sigurd. "She will have no lover but me—god or man, Sigurd! What do you mean?"

"Take hand from sword, blood-brother," Sigurd had replied. "I meant not to offend you. Only"—he hesitated—"gods are gods! And there was something in that galley captain's talk about your woman walking in dream, memory withdrawn from her—was there not? If that be so—blood-brother—you were in those memories she has lost!"

Kenton winced. He had not forgotten. Insistently the same thought had gnawed at him since their journey's beginning; was, perhaps, prime reason for his desperate haste. Another thought, that also since then had comforted him, prompted his tongue.

"Nergal once tried to part a man and a woman who loved," he said, "even as Sharane and I. He could not. I do not think Nergal's priest can succeed where his infernal master failed."

"Not well reasoned, comrade." It was Zubran who had come quietly upon them. "The gods are strong. Therefore they have no reason for subtlety or cunning. They smite—and all is done. It is not artistic, I admit—but it is unanswerable. But man, who has not the strength of the gods, must resort to cunning and subtlety. That is why man will do worse things than the gods. Out of his weakness he is forced to it. The gods should not be blamed—except for making man weak. Therefore Klaneth is more to be feared by you than Nergal, his master."

"He cannot drive me out of Sharane's heart!" Kenton cried. "He cannot!"

The Viking bent his head down to the compass.

"You may be right," he muttered. "Zubran may be right. All I know is that while your woman is faithful to the God Bel, no man may harm her!"

Vague as he might be on that one point, the Viking was direct

and full of meat upon others of vital importance to them all. The Norseman had been observant while slave to the priests of Nergal. He knew the city thoroughly and the Temple of the Seven Zones intimately. Best of all he knew a way of entering Emakhtila by another road than that of its harbor.

This was indeed all important, since it was not within the bounds of possibility that they could enter that harbor without instant recognition. In fact it had never been thought of. Their loose plan had been to find some lonely secret place, hide the ship and go overland to the city.

And it turned out that Sigurd knew exactly such a place. It was not far from Emakhtila itself as the crow flies, yet a long sail for galleys coming out of the harbor.

"Look, comrades." Sigurd scratched with point of sword a rude map on the planks of the deck. "Here lies the city. It is at the end of a fjord. The mountains rise on each side of it and stretch in two long spits far out to sea. But here"—he pointed to a spot in the coast line close to the crotch where a left hand mountain barrier shot out from the coast—"is a bay with narrow entrance from sea. It is used by the priests of Nergal for a certain secret sacrifice. Between it and the city a hidden way runs through the hills. That path brings you out close to the great temple. I have traveled the hidden way and have stood on the shores of that bay. I went there with other slaves, bearing priests in litters and things of the sacrifice. While it would take two good sleeps for a ship to make that journey from Emakhtila, it is by that way only half so far as a strong man could walk in my own land between the dawn and noon of a winter day. Also there are many places there where the ship can be hidden. Few galleys pass by and none lives near—which was why the priests of Nergal picked it.

"Also I know well the Temple of the Seven Zones—since long

it was my home," went on Sigurd. "Its height is twenty times the ship's mast."

Kenton swiftly estimated. That would make the temple four hundred feet—a respectable height indeed.

"Its core," said the Viking, "is made up of the sanctuaries of the gods and the goddess Ishtar, one upon each other. Around this core are the quarters of the priests and priestesses and lesser shrines. These secret sanctuaries are seven, the last being the House of Bel. At the base of the temple is a vast court with altars and other shrines where the people come to worship. Its entrances are strongly guarded. Even we four could not enter —there!

"But around the temple, which is shaped thus"—he scratched the outline of a truncated cone—"a stairway runs thus"—he drew a spiral from base to top of cone. "At intervals, along that stairway, are sentinels. There is a garrison where it begins. Is this all clear?"

"It is clear," said Gigi, "that we would need an army to take it!"

"Not so," the Viking said, unruffled. "Remember how we took the galley—although they outnumbered us? This is my plan. We will take the ship into that secret harbor. If priests are there we must do what we can—slay or flee. But if the Norns decree that no priests be there, we will hide the ship and leave the slaves in care of the black-skin. Then the four of us, dressed as seamen in the clothes and the long cloaks we took from the galley, will take the hidden way and go into the city.

"When we are there we will separate, having first selected some meeting place. Separately we will study that stairway up the Seven Zones Temple, meet and make a plan to get past that garrison that is at its foot.

"For as to that stairway, I have another plan. It is high walled —up to a man's chest. If we can pass without arousing the

guards at its base, we can creep up under shadow of that wall, slaying the sentinels as we go, until we reach the House of Bel.

"But not in fair weather could we do this," he added. "There must be darkness or storm that they see us not from the streets. And that is why I pray to Odin, blood-brother, even as you, that this brewing tempest may not boil until we have reached the city and looked upon that stairway. For in that storm that is surely coming we could do as I have planned and swiftly—let Odin All-Father hold it off to our need!"

"But in this plan I see no chance of slaying Klaneth," growled Zubran. "We creep in, we creep up, we creep out again with Sharane—if we can. And that is all. By Ormuzd, my knees are too tender for creeping! Also my scimitar thirsts for drink of the black priest's blood."

"No safety while Klaneth lives!" croaked Gigi, playing upon his old tune.

"I have no thought of Klaneth now," rumbled the Viking. "First comes Kenton's woman. Shield swore Sigurd to be to him. My sword as his sword. His fortune Sigurd's fortune. His bane Sigurd's bane, and his desire mine to help him gain it. Brothers by the blood runes. He gets his woman. After that—we take up the black priest."

Tears were in Kenton's eyes as he gripped the Norseman's hands. And Gigi grinned and slapped Sigurd's back.

"I am shamed," said Zubran. "You are right, of course, Sigurd. I should have remembered. Yet, in truth, I would feel easier if we could kill Klaneth on our way to her. For I agree with Gigi—while he lives, no safety for your blood-brother or any of us. However—the Lady Sharane first, of course."

The Viking had been peering down into the compass. He looked again, intently, and drew back, pointing to it.

Both the blue serpents in the scarlet bath were parallel, their heads turned to one point!

"We head straight to Emakhtila," said Sigurd. "But are we within the jaws of that fjord or out of them? Wherever we are we must be close!"

He swung the rudder of oars to port. The ship veered. The larger needle slipped a quarter of the space to the right between the red symbols on the bowl edge. The smaller held steady.

"That proves nothing," grunted the Viking, "except that we are no longer driving straight to the city. But we may be close upon the mounts. Check the oarsmen, bid the overseer drive slowly."

Slower went the ship, and slower, feeling her way through the mists. And suddenly they darkened before them. Something grew out of them slowly, slowly. It lay revealed as a low shore, rising sharply and melting into deeper shadows behind. The turquoise waves ran gently to it, caressing its rocks. Sigurd swore a great oath of thankfulness.

"We are on the other side of the mounts," he said. "Now somewhere close is that secret bay of which I told you. Bid the overseer drive the ship along as we are."

He swung the rudder sharply to starboard. The ship turned; slowly followed the shore. Soon in front of them loomed a high ridge of rock. This they skirted, circled its end and still sculling silently came at last to another narrow strait into which the Viking steered.

"A place for hiding," he said. "Send the ship into that cluster of trees ahead. Nay—there is water there, the trees rise out of it. Once within them the ship can be seen neither from shore nor sea."

They drifted into the grove. Long, densely leaved branches covered them. The bow muzzled the shore.

"Now lash her to the tree trunks," whispered Sigurd. "Go softly. Priests may be about. We will look for them later, when we are on our way. We leave the ship in charge of the women.

The black-skin stays behind. Let them all lie close till we return. Let the slaves sleep. And if we do not return—"

He shrugged brawny shoulders.

"There would be better chance for you to return if you cut off that long hair of yours and your beard, Sigurd," said the Persian, and added: "Better chance for us, also."

"Wait!" cried the Viking, outraged. "Cut my hair! Why, even when I was slave they left that untouched!"

"Wise counsel!" said Kenton. "And Zubran—that flaming beard of yours and your red hair. Better for you and us, too, if you left them behind—or changed their color."

"By Ormuzd, no!" exclaimed the Persian, as outraged as Sigurd. The Viking laughed.

"The fowler sets the net and is caught with the bird! Nevertheless, it *was* good counsel. Better hair off face and head than head off shoulders!"

"And better change color of beard and hair, I suppose, than change this world for another I know nothing of," agreed the Persian grudgingly.

The maids brought shears. Laughing, they snipped his locks to nape of neck, trimmed the long beard into short spade shape. Amazing was the transformation of Sigurd, Trygg's son, brought about by that shearing. The maids looked on him, admiration in their eyes.

"There is one that Klaneth will not know if he sees him," grunted Gigi. "But you must pay your price, Sigurd. See how the maids look at you! And they are all of them dark girls! Beware, Sigurd—or hide from them until your hair grows long again."

Now the Persian put himself in the women's hands. They dabbled at beard and head with cloth dipped in a bowl of some black liquid. The red faded, then darkened into brown. Not so great was the difference between him and the old Zubran as there

was between the new and old Sigurd. But Kenton and Gigi nodded approvingly—at least the red that made him as conspicuous as the Norseman's long hair was gone.

Remained Kenton and Gigi. Little could be done for either of them. There was no changing Gigi's frog slit of a mouth, the twinkling beady eyes, the bald pate, the immense shoulders.

"Take out your earrings, Gigi," bade Kenton.

"Take off that bracelet on your arm," replied Gigi.

"Sharane's gift! Never!" exclaimed Kenton, as outraged as had been at first the Norseman and the Persian.

"My earrings were put there by one who loved me as much as she does you." For the first time since Kenton had known Gigi there was anger in his voice.

The Persian laughed softly. It broke the tension. Kenton grinned at the drummer, somewhat guiltily. Gigi grinned back.

"Well," he said. "It seems that we must all make our sacrifices —Sigurd of his hair, Zubran his red and you and I—" he began to unscrew the earrings.

"No, Gigi!" Kenton stayed his hands; he could not bring himself to break that golden band upon which Sharane had graven the symbols of her love. "Leave them be. Rings and bracelet—both can be hidden."

"I do not know—" Gigi paused doubtfully. "It seems to me to be better. That idea of sacrifice—it grows stronger."

"There is little sense in what you say," said Kenton stubbornly.

"No?" mused Gigi. "Yet many men must have seen that bracelet of yours that time you fought the black priest's men and lost Sharane. Klaneth must have seen it. Something whispers to me that token is more perilous than mine."

"Well, nothing whispers to me," said Kenton abruptly. He led the way into what had been Klaneth's cabin and began strip-

ping to clothe himself in the sailors' gear they had taken from the captured galley. He slipped on a loose shirt of finely tanned, thin leather whose loose sleeves fastened around his wrists.

"You see," he said to Gigi, "the bracelet is hidden."

Next came loose hose of the same material drawn tight by a girdle around the waist. He drew on high, laced buskins. Over the shirt he fastened a sleeveless tunic of mail. On his head he placed a conical metal covered cap from whose padded sides dropped shoulder deep folds of heavy oiled silk.

The others dressed with him in similar garments. Only the Persian would not leave off his own linked mail. He knew its strength, he said, and the others were new to him. That was an old friend, often tried and always faithful, he said; he would not cast it off for new ones whose loyalty was still untried. But over it he drew one of the shirts and over that a tunic from the galley. And Gigi, after he had set the cap upon his head, drew close the folds of silk so that they hid his ears and their jet pendants. Also he fastened around his neck another long fold of silk, binding the others fast and hiding his mouth.

And when they had covered themselves with the long cloaks they scanned each other with lightened hearts. The Viking and the Persian were true changelings. Little fear of recognition there. Changed enough by his new garb, it seemed to them, was Kenton. The cloak hid Gigi's stumpy legs and the cloths around his face, the close fitting, conical cap altered it curiously into one not easily recognizable.

"It is good!" murmured the Viking.

"It is very good!" echoed Kenton.

They belted themselves and thrust into the belts both their own swords and short ones of Sigurd's forging. Only Gigi would take neither that nine foot blade the Norseman had made for him nor the great mace. The latter was too well known; the other too cumbersome for their journey; impossible, like the

mace, to hide. He took two swords of average length. Last he picked up a long, thin piece of rope, swiftly spliced to it a small grappling hook. He coiled the rope around his waist, hanging the grapple to his belt.

"Lead, Sigurd," said Kenton.

One by one they dropped over the ship's bow, waded through shallow water and stood upon the shore while Sigurd cast about for his bearings. The mists had grown thicker. The golden leaves, the pannicles of crimson and yellow blooms were etched against them as though upon some ancient Chinese screen. In the mists Sigurd moved, shadowy. The trees were motionless. The whole air was motionless.

As though it were waiting—and fearful!

"Come," the Viking joined them. "I have found the way."

Silently they followed him through the mists, under the silver shadows of the trees.

THE BRACELET BETRAYS

Chapter Twenty-Two

THAT WAS A HIDDEN WAY, IN TRUTH. HOW SIGURD FOLLOWED it in the glimmering fog, by what signs led, Kenton could not tell. But the Viking walked along, unhesitant. Close behind him waddled Gigi and from time to time he saw Sigurd point here and there as though he were explaining the way. Soon he was sure of this, for frequently the Ninevite would pause as though to have instructions repeated. What they whispered he could not hear. Six feet behind them strode the Persian, with Kenton the same distance behind him.

Between high rocks covered with the golden ferns the narrow road ran, and through thickets where the still air was languorous with the scent of myriads of strange blossoms; through dense clumps of slender trunks which were like bamboo stems all lacquered scarlet, and through groves where trees grew primly in parklike precision and under which the tarnished silver shadows were thick. Their steps made no sound on the soft moss. They had long lost the murmur of the sea. Sound of any kind around them there was none.

At the skirt of one of these ordered groves the Viking paused.

"This is the place of Nergal's sacrifice," he whispered. "I go to see if any of Nergal's black dogs are about. Wait for me here."

He melted into the mists. They waited, silent. For each felt that something evil, some hideous malignity lay sleeping within those trees and if they spoke or moved it would awaken, reach out, draw them to it. That wood was saturated with evil. And out of it, as though the sleeping evil breathed, pulsed the sickly sweet and charnel odor that had hung in Klaneth's cabin.

Silently as he had gone, Sigurd returned.

"No black robes there," he said softly. "Yet—something of their dark god dwells in that grove always. Eager am I to pass this place. Go softly and quickly. Speak not again to me, Gigi, until I bid you."

Softly, quickly they went, skirting that place of evil with cold sweat on Kenton's brow and hands. At last Sigurd paused, exhaled a vast sigh of relief.

"I like not that grove," he said. "And you would like it even less than you did if you knew what Nergal's priests do therein. Even you, Zubran, would lose some of that weariness of which so often you complain."

"Good!" replied the Persian blandly. "Viking, I thank you. Now when I am Lord of Emakhtila I will save some of Nergal's priests that they may come there and perform before me."

"Thor shield us!" The Viking made the sign of the Hammer. "Talk not like that, Zubran—not here. Quick!"

He led them with increased speed. Soon Gigi and he were whispering as before. And now the way began to climb steeply. On they went and higher and higher. They passed through a long and deep ravine in which the glimmering, misty light was hardly strong enough for them to pick their way over the bowlders that strewed it.

They passed out of it between two huge monoliths—and halted. For abruptly the silence that had enveloped them was broken. Before them was nothing but the wall of the mists, but from them and far, far below came a murmuring, a humming as of a great city; came, too, the creaking of masts, the rattle of gear, the splashing of oars and now and then a shouting, darting up like a kite from the vague clamor.

"The harbor," whispered Sigurd, and pointed downward to the right. "We are high above it. Emakhtila lies beneath us—close. And there, blood-brother,"—he pointed again downward and a little to the left—"there is the Temple of the Seven Zones."

Kenton followed the pointing finger. A mighty mass loomed darkly in the silvery haze, its nebulous outlines cone-shaped, its top flattened. His heart quickened.

"On, Sigurd," he bade, trembling.

Down they went, and ever down. Again the way was hidden by trees and rocks, but as they went through what must have been open spaces the murmuring of the city came to them ever louder and louder. And ever the great bulk of the temple grew plainer, climbing higher and higher into the heavens as they descended. And ever the mists hid the city from them.

Abruptly they came to a high stone wall. Here Sigurd swiftly turned and led them into a grove of trees, thick, heavily shadowed. Through the trees they slipped, following the Viking who now went on with even greater caution than he had shown at the place of sacrifice.

At last he peered out from behind an enormous trunk, beckoned them. They clustered about him. Beyond the trees was a deep rutted, broad roadway.

"A road into the city," he said. "A free road on which we can walk without fear."

They clambered down a high bank and took that road, walk-

ing now side by side. Soon the trees gave way to fields, cultivated as far as the mists would let them see; fields filled with high plants whose leaves were shaped like those of the corn, but saffron yellow instead of green and instead of ears long pannicles of gleaming white grains; rows of bushes on whose branches shone berries green as emeralds; strange fruits; tree-stemmed vines from which fell curious star-shaped gourds.

They saw houses, two-storied invariably; blocklike with smaller cubes for wings, like those a child makes with its nursery blocks. They were painted startlingly—both in colors and patterns. Façades striped with alternate vertical yard wide bands of blue and yellow, façades of dull blue through which darted scarlet zigzags like the conventionalized lightning bolt. Broad horizontal bands of crimson barred with stripes of green.

The road narrowed, became a thoroughfare paved with blocks that felt beneath the feet like volcanic rock—*tufa*. The painted houses became thicker. Men and women passed them, brown faced and black, clad alike in one sleeveless white garment cut short just below the knees. On the right wrist of each of these was a bronze ring from which fell a half dozen links of chain. They carried burdens—jugs, baskets of the odd fruits and gourds, loaves of bread colored ruddy brown, flat cakes a foot across. They glanced at the four curiously as they passed.

"Slaves," said Sigurd.

Now the painted houses stood solidly, side by side. These were galleried and on the galleries were flowering trees and plants like those upon the rosy cabin of the ship. From some of them women leaned and called out to them as they went by.

They passed out of this street into a roaring thoroughfare thronged with people. And here Kenton halted in sheer amazement. Wonder and surprise he had thought gone with that old self of his. But at this sight they flamed up anew.

At the far end of the thoroughfare loomed the huge bulk

of the temple. Its sides were lined with shops. At their doors stood men crying out their wares. Banners fell from them on which in woven silk ran the cuneiform letters that told their goods.

Past him walked Assyrians, men of Nineveh and of Babylon with curled heads and ringleted beards; hook nosed, fierce eyed Phœnicians; sloe-eyed, muslin skirted Egyptians; Ethiopians with great golden circlets in their ears; almond lidded, smiling yellow men. Soldiers in cuirasses of linked mail, archers with quivers on back and bows in hand strode by him, priests in robes of black and crimson and blue. Stood in front of him for an instant a ruddy skinned, smooth muscled warrior who carried upon one shoulder the double bladed ax of ancient Crete. Over his other shoulder lay the white arm of a sandalled woman in oddly modern pleated and patterned skirt, snake girdled and with high, white breast peeping from her opened and as oddly modern blouse. A Minoan and his mate he knew the pair to be, two who had perhaps watched the youths and maids who were Athens' tribute to the Minotaur go through the door of the labyrinth to the lair where the monstrous man-bull awaited them.

And there went a cuirassed Roman, gripping a wicked short sword of bronze that might have, and probably did, help cut out the paths the first Cæsar trod. Behind him a giant Gaul with twisted locks and eyes as coldly blue as Sigurd's own.

Up and down along the center of the thoroughfare rode men and women in litters borne on the shoulders of slaves. His eyes followed a Grecian girl, long limbed and lithe, with hair as yellow as the ripened wheat. They followed, too, a hot eyed Carthaginian girl lovely enough to be a bride of Baal who leaned over the side of her litter and smiled at him.

"I am hungry and I thirst," grunted Sigurd. "Why do we stand here? Let us be going."

And suddenly Kenton realized that this pageant of past ages

could be no strange thing to them who were also of that past. He nodded assent. They swung into the crowd and stopped at last before a place wherein men sat eating and drinking.

"Better for us to enter two by two," said Gigi. "Klaneth seeks four men and we are four strangers. Wolf, go you in first with Sigurd. Zubran and I will follow—but speak not to us when we enter."

The shopkeeper set food before them and high beakers of red wine. He was garrulous; he asked them when they had made harbor; if their voyage had been a good one.

"It is a good time not to be at sea," he said. "Storm comes—and a great one. I pray to Nabu, Dispenser of Waters, that he hold it until Bel's worship is ended. I close my shop later to see that new priestess of Bel's they talk so much about."

Kenton's face had been bent over, his cap veils hiding it. But at this he raised it and stared full into the man's face.

And the shopkeeper blenched, faltered, stared back at him with wide eyes!

Had he been recognized? His hand sought stealthily his sword.

"Pardon!" gasped the shopkeeper. "I know you not—" Then abruptly he peered closer, straightened and laughed. "By Bel! I thought you were—another. Gods! How you look like him!"

He hurried away. Kenton looked after him, puzzled. Was his departure a ruse? Had he really recognized him as the man Klaneth sought? It could not be. His fright had been too real; his relief too sincere. Who was it then that Kenton looked like to bring forth this fright and relief? They finished their food quickly, paid from the gold they had taken from the galley; passed out into the street.

Almost at once Gigi and the Persian joined them.

"To the temple," ordered Kenton. Two by two they sauntered down the street, not hurrying, like men just in from a long

voyage. But as they went Kenton, with an ever growing puzzlement and apprehension, saw now one and now another glance at him, pause as though in wonder and then, averting eyes, go swiftly by. The others saw it, too.

"Draw the cap cloths about your face," said Gigi, uneasily. "I like not the way they stare. And yet—if they thought they knew you—would they not set the soldiers on you? But they do not—they go by as though afraid."

Briefly he told him and Zubran of the shopkeeper and what he had said.

"That is bad." Gigi shook his head. "It draws attention to us. Now who can it be you so resemble that those who look at you grow frightened? Well—hide your face as best you can."

And this Kenton did, keeping his head bent as he walked. Nevertheless folks still turned to stare at him.

The street entered a broad park. People were strolling over its sward, sitting on benches of stone, gigantic roots of trees whose trunks were thick as the sequoia and whose branches were lost in the slowly thickening mists. And when they had gone a little way Sigurd turned off the highway into this park.

"Blood-brother," he said. "Gigi is right. They stare at you too much. Now it comes to me that better for you and for us will it be if you go no further. Better hiding place for you than this I know none. Therefore sit you here upon this bench. Bow your head as though asleep or drunken. There are few here and they will be fewer as the temple court fills. The mists hide you from those who pass along the street. Here you should be safe. The three of us will go on to the temple and study that stairway. Then we will return to you and we will all take counsel."

He knew the Viking was right. Steadily at the turned heads and whispering his unease had grown. And yet—it was hard to remain here, not to see for himself that place where Sharane lay

captive, leave to others the chance of finding way to her. And yet—Sigurd was right.

"Courage, brother," said Sigurd gently as they left him. "Odin has held off the storm for us. Odin will help us get your woman."

Now for a time, a long, long time, it seemed to him, he sat upon that bench with face covered by hands. Stronger and stronger grew that desire to see for himself Sharane's prison, study its weaknesses. After all, his comrades were not as interested as he; their eyes not sharpened by love and pity. He might succeed where they would fail; his sharpened eyes see what theirs would miss. And at last the desire mastered him. He arose from the bench, made his way back to the thronged street. But when it was a few steps away, he turned and went along through the park, paralleling it but not going out on it.

And in a short while he came to the end of the park and stood, half hidden, looking out.

Directly before him, not fifty yards away, arose the immense bulk of the Temple of the Seven Zones!

It blocked his vision like a colossal barrier. How great its base must be he could not tell; he estimated that it must cover ten or more acres. It was conical, smooth built of some material whose character he could not even guess. The great stairway coiled round it like a serpent. And now he saw why it was called the Temple of the Seven Zones. For a hundred feet up from its base it shone like burnished silver. There a circular terrace bit into the cone. Above that terrace for another hundred feet the cone was covered with some metal of red gold color, rich orange. Came another terrace and above that a façade of jet black, dull and dead. Again the terrace. Above them the mists hid the walls, but he thought that through them he could see a glint of flaming scarlet and over it a blue shadow.

His eyes followed the girdling stairway. He stepped forward

that he might see a little better. Broad steps led up from its base to a wide platform on which stood many men in armor. That, he thought, was the garrison which they must either trick or overcome before they could climb these steps. His heart sank as he counted the soldiers that guarded it.

He looked beyond them and stood, thoughts racing. The rise of the stairway from the platform of the guards was gradual. About a thousand feet away the park came close to the side of the temple. There was a clump of high trees whose branches almost touched the stairway at that point. Gigi's rope and grapple! Ah, wise was the Ninevite anticipating some such chance, he thought. Kenton was the lightest of the four—he could climb those trees, drop to the stairway, or if that were not possible, cast the grapple over the wall of it, swing in and climb up the rope and over!

Then he could drop that rope for the three to swarm it. It could be done! And if in such storm as Sigurd prophesied, with certainty of giving no alarm to the garrison below.

Exultation swept him. Some sixth sense woke him from it; whispered warning. He started, saw that the space between him and the temple was empty of people; saw an officer of the garrison standing at the base of the steps watching him.

Swiftly Kenton turned; swiftly skirted the street until he was back to where he had first gone from his bench; found that bench and seated himself on it as he had been before—bent over, face in hands.

He could not see that same officer beckon another, speak quickly to him, then run across the deserted stretch, and enter the wooded park close behind him. Nor did he see that officer stealing along a hundred paces in the rear, keeping him in sight until he had reached the bench.

But as he sat there, he felt someone drop down beside him.

"What is the matter, sailor?" came a voice, roughly kind. "If you are sick why not go home?"

Kenton spoke huskily, keeping his face covered.

"Too much of Emakhtila wine," he answered. "Leave me be. It will pass."

"Ho!" laughed the other, and gripped his arm about the elbow. "Look up. Better seek home before the tempest breaks."

"No, no," said Kenton, thickly. "Never mind the tempest. Water will help me."

The hand dropped from his arm. For a space, whoever it was beside him, was silent. Then he arose.

"Right, sailor," he said heartily. "Stay here. Stretch out on the bench and sleep a little. The gods be with you!"

"And with you," muttered Kenton. He heard the footsteps of that brief companionship retreating. Cautiously he turned his head, looked in their direction. There were several figures walking there among the trees. One was an old man in a long blue cloak; another an officer dressed like those he had seen on the great stairway; a sailor; a hurrying citizen. Which of them had sat beside him?

He wondered idly for a moment, then his mind filled again with plannings to reach Sharane. Abruptly another thought came—the man who had sat beside him had gripped his arm, gripped it where Sharane's bracelet bound. And that officer—the soldier from the garrison! Was it he? Had he followed him?

He sat bolt upright, clapped his right hand on the sleeve of the leather shirt under which was the bracelet. His hand touched —the bracelet! The sleeve had been slit by a knife to reveal it!

It *had* been the officer! He *had* seen and followed him! He had felt the bracelet and cut the sleeve to see if it were that golden circlet which Gigi had said would betray him more swiftly than the earrings would Gigi!

That a sacrifice was demanded of all four! He had not made that sacrifice.

And the bracelet had betrayed him!

The soldier? He had gone to bring help, of course. That was why he had counseled him to stay there—to sleep a while! Almost he laughed at the irony of that last.

He leaped to his feet—to run. Before he could take a step there was a rustling behind him, a trampling. A heavy cloth was thrown over his head like a bag. Hands clutched his throat. Other hands wound strand after strand of rope around his arms, pinioning them to his sides.

"Take that cloth off his face—but keep your hands around his throat," said a cold dead voice.

His head was freed. He looked straight into the dead eyes of Klaneth!

Then from the double ring of soldiers around him came a gasp of amazement, a movement of terror. The officer stepped forward, stared at him incredulously.

"Mother of the gods!" he groaned, and knelt at Kenton's feet. "Lord—I did not know—" He leaped up, set knife to his bonds.

"Stop!" Klaneth spoke. "It is the man! Look again!"

Trembling, the officer studied Kenton's face, lifted the cap veils; swore.

"Gods!" he exclaimed, "but I thought it was—"

"And it is not," interposed Klaneth, smoothly. His eyes gloated over Kenton. He reached down into his belt, drew from it the sword of Nabu.

"Hold!" The officer quietly took it from him. "This man is my prisoner until I deliver him to the Sultan. And till then I keep his sword."

The phosphorescence in the pupils of the black priest glowed.

"He goes straight to Nergal's House," he rumbled. "Best beware, captain, how you cross Klaneth."

"Cross or no cross," replied the officer, "I am the Sultan's man. His orders I obey. And you know as well as I do that he has commanded all prisoners to be brought before him first—no matter what even high priests may say. Besides," he added slyly, "there is that matter of the reward. Best to get this capture a matter of record. The Sultan is a just man."

The black priest stood silent, fingering his cruel mouth. The officer laughed.

"March!" he snapped. "To the temple. If this man escapes—all your lives for his."

In a triple ring of the soldiers walked Kenton. On one side of him strode the officer; on the other the black priest, evil, gloating gaze never leaving him; Klaneth, licking his merciless lips and with hell fire bright in his eyes.

Thus they passed through the wooded park, out into the wondering street and at last through a high archway, and were swallowed up within a gateway of the temple.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DARK IT WAS WITHIN THE TEMPLE OF THE SEVEN ZONES; darker still was the corridor into which they wheeled after they had left the gateway behind them; and as they marched on darker and ever darker it became. Now Kenton could no longer see the pair who flanked him nor the triple ring of armored men that girded them. He wondered how they could find their way through this lightless place. And the sound of the triple ring's marching feet—why had that grown so faint?

So faint!

There was no longer sound of marching feet—no longer sound of any kind!

Nothing but soft, blind, silent darkness—

Wait! Far, far away, piercing the dark silence, he heard the shrieking of winds—mighty winds roaring out of the farthest corners of space. Closer they came. They clamored and circled about him!

And now he too was circling, swinging in wide arcs through the blackness—falling!

Panic realization shook him! He strained at his bonds, trying to break them, to stretch out hands, clutch something, some one, to stay his headlong flight—

Flight from Sharane's world into—his own!

"Not back!" he wailed. "Not that! Gigi! Sigurd! Help me! Ishtar! Nabu! Hold me—"

The mouths of the winds closed; the sickening flight came abruptly to end. Had—*They*—heard? Answered?

Gasping, he slowly opened eyes. Opened them—and felt cold fingers of despair close round his heart.

Again he was within his own room!

A clock began to strike. One—two—his numbed mind counted the strokes.

Eleven!

Eleven o'clock! Then only an hour had gone by since he had last stood here, his life blood running out of his wounds. Why—that blood was not yet dry upon the rugs! And here he stood, the sword bites from which that blood had run long healed; old scars!

A glance only he gave himself in the long mirror; one glance at the haggard white face, the despairing eyes that were his own; the thongs that lashed his arms to sides. He looked down on the jeweled ship. The oars were in; the peacock sail was furled. He saw the slaves in the galley pit—toys; toys crouching, flung lengthwise, on the benches—asleep. The overseer, a toy of jet, leaned forward, chin cupped in hands. At the door of Sharane's cabin a girl looked forth, head raised, her eyes of tiny blue gems scanning an unseen sky.

Toys upon a toy ship!

A ship of toys—and still the only key to a world that held for him all realities!

He knelt, sobbing.

"Ishtar! Great Mother! Take me back! Nabu! Lord of Wisdom! Show me the way! Lead me—"

He stopped—the cold fingers around his heart clutching tighter. What if he did get back upon the ship? How could that help him? Never, he knew, could he retrace that hidden path along which the Viking had led them. And if by any miracle he might—still it would not help. Long before he could reach the city, long before he could search out the others, the dice would have been cast! The issue decided!

And if he did not leave the ship and they returned—found him lurking there—what would they think of him! That he had abandoned them, had fled like a craven, had left them to bear the burden of rescue of the woman he loved!

How could they think else?

But no! No—they would not return!

They would not leave the city, would not return to the ship—without him. Not Gigi, not Sigurd nor Zubran, not—Sharane! There they would stay, searching for him. And not long could be that search before they were taken—marked men and woman as they were!

That thought was even harder to bear.

And yet, if he did not get back to that unknown world—all, all was lost to him! Everything! All sweetness of life—all reason for living!

Sharane—lost to him forever!

He groaned, in agony of despair, of shame, of longing.

A wild hope swept him! Whatever power it was that sent him swinging like a pendulum between these two worlds—could not that power set him otherwhere than on the Ship of Ishtar? Aye! But what of that mysterious factor of time—the time that there rushed so much more swiftly than here? The time that in a few hours had changed him from scholarly weakling to the steel-thewed, steel-nerved man he was! Swifter, far swifter

that time flowed—and yet, flowing, it left untouched, unchanged, each living thing. Could not the—Powers—that ruled this world hold back that world's time at their will; turn it back?

Upon the mercy of those powers he would throw himself, entirely, without reserves!

Kenton leaned forward until his forehead touched the side of the shining ship.

"Ishtar! Goddess! Mother!" he prayed. "Nabu! Holy ones! I ask no freedom! I ask no strength from you! I ask but one thing—to set me back! Not to the ship but from whence I came! Give me again to Klaneth! Set me among his men even as I was. And if that means torment, if that means death—I am content! Set me there as I was, bound and helpless—and whatever may happen, whatever torment may fall to me—still will I worship and give praise to you. Ishtar—Nabu—praise to you until my last breath! Grant me this—Nabu! Ishtar!"

Under Kenton's feet the floor rocked. Darkness fell within the room, shutting out all sight both of room and ship; a darkness such as that through which he had fallen—out of the Temple of the Seven Zones. Within that same soft, blind, silent darkness he felt himself whirled round and round, like stone on string's end. The whirling ceased; he shot out through the blackness like the stone released; shot out; was encompassed by roaring, mighty winds.

The blackness grayed. He hovered—between two worlds. Beneath him he saw the Ship of Ishtar; looked down upon it at one and the same time from incredible heights and from close above—

"No!" groaned Kenton. "Not the ship! Mother Ishtar! Lord of Wisdom! Not the ship! Sharane! My soul for hers! Set me within the temple! Ishtar! Ishtar!—"

Inexorably, misty outlines of hull and mast contracted into

solidity! Now he was poised close above the mast, was falling gently down it—hovered over the deck—

Something like a vast, white, radiant wing flashed out of the cabin of Sharane. It caught him, cradled him, enfolded him! The ship vanished from his sight.

He had sense of flight swift as lightning stroke; felt jarring fall.

"Up, slave!" he heard Klaneth snarl; the black priest's toe was in his ribs!

"Gently, priest," came the voice of the officer who had trapped him; he was drawn by the soldier's hand to his feet.

As one awakening from a dream Kenton stared about him. He was in a broad, well lighted passageway; the triple ring of soldiers circling him, waiting for command to go on. All was as it had been before the blind darkness had stolen down upon him, whirled him back to his world!

Ishtar—Nabu! *They* had answered him—*They* had granted his prayer!

Kenton threw back his head; laughed.

"On!" he cried. And laughing still took up the march.

To torment—to death? What did it matter?

The burden of his despair had been lifted; come what might, now he need feel no shame.

On to torment and death—what did it matter?

THE KING OF THE TWO DEATHS

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE LORD OF EMAKHTILA, KING OF THE TWO DEATHS, SAT LEGS crooked on a high divan. He was very like Old King Cole of the nursery rhyme, even to that monarch's rubicund jollity, his apple round, pippin red cheeks. Merriment shone in his somewhat watery blue eyes. He wore one loose robe of scarlet. His long, white beard, stained here and there with drops of red and purple and yellow wine, wagged roguishly.

The judgment chamber of the Lord of Emakhtila was some hundred feet square. His divan rested on a platform five feet high that stretched from side to side like a stage. The chequered floor raised in a sharp concave curve to build it. The curved front was cut through by a broad flight of low wide steps ascending from the lower floor and ending about five feet from the divan of the king.

Two and ten archers in belted kirtles of silver and scarlet stood on the lowest step, shoulder to shoulder, bows at stand, arrows at strings, ready on the instant to be raised to ears and loosed. Four and twenty archers knelt at their feet. Six and

thirty shafts of death were leveled at Kenton, black priest and the captain.

Out from each side of the steps and along the curved wall to where it met the sides of the chamber another file of bowmen stretched, scarlet and silver, shoulder to shoulder, arrows alert. The twinkling eyes of the king could see the backs of their heads ranged over the edge of his stage like footlights.

Along the other three walls, shoulder to shoulder, arrows at strings, eyes fixed on the Lord of Emakhtila, ran an unbroken silver and scarlet frieze of archers. They stood silent; tense as automatons tightly wound and waiting for touch upon some hidden spring.

The chamber was windowless. Pale blue tapestries covered all its walls. A hundred lamps lighted it with still, yellow flames.

Twice a tall man's height away from the king's left hand a veiled shape stood, motionless as the bowmen. Even through its thick veils came subtle hints of beauty. At the same distance from the king's right hand another veiled shape stood. Nor could its veils check hint of horror seeping forth from what they covered. One shape set the pulses leaping. One shape checked them.

On the floor, at the king's feet, crouched a giant Chinese with a curved and crimson sword.

Close to each end of the divan girls stood, fair and young and naked to their waists. Six to this side—six to that. They held ewers filled with wine. At their feet were great bowls of wine, red and purple and yellow, in larger bowls of snow.

At the right hand of the King of the Two Deaths knelt a girl with golden cup on outstretched palms. At his left hand another knelt, a golden flagon on her palms. And the king to drink used equally well his left hand and his right, raising cup or flagon, setting them to his lips, putting them back. Whereupon at once they were refilled.

The King of the Two Deaths was quite drunk.

Through many passages the captain and the black priest had hurried Kenton to this place. And now the king drank deep, set down his cup and clapped his hands.

"The Lord of Emakhtila judges!" intoned the Chinese, sonorously.

"He judges!" whispered the bowmen ranged along the walls.

Kenton, black priest and captain stepped forward until their breasts touched the foremost arrow points. The king leaned, merry eyes twinkling on Kenton.

"What jest is this, Klaneth?" he cried in a high, thin treble. "Or have the Houses of the God Bel and the God Nergal declared war upon each other?"

"They are not at war, lord," answered Klaneth. "This is the slave for whom I have offered great reward and whom I now claim since I have taken—"

"Since *I* have taken, Mighty One," interrupted the captain, kneeling as he spoke. "And so have earned Klaneth's reward, O Just One!"

"You lie, Klaneth!" chuckled the king. "If you are not at war why have you trussed up the High Priest of Bel like a chicken?"

So! High Priest of Bel was he for whom Kenton had been mistaken? So that was why the people on the street had stared at him? Why the soldiers had murmured and the captain been at first afraid. And Sharane was Priestess of Bel—prisoner of Bel's priests! How could he turn this to advantage—

"Look again, lord," said Klaneth. "I do not lie."

The watery eyes peered closer at Kenton.

"No!" laughed the king. "He is not the high priest. He is what the high priest would be were he as much a man. Well, well—all this has made me thirsty."

He raised the flagon; before he had half lifted it to his lips he paused and looked into it.

"Half full!" giggled the king. "Only half full!"

He looked from the flagon to the girl who stood closest to the kneeling girl at left. His merry round face beamed on her.

"Insect!" chuckled the king. "You forgot to fill my flagon!"

He raised a finger.

Twang-g! A bow string sang along the left wall, an arrow shrilled. It struck the trembling girl in the shoulder on the right side. She swayed, eyes closed.

"Bad!" the king cried merrily, and again held up a finger.

Twang-g! From the frieze along the right wall another bow string sang; an arrow whistled across the room. The shaft cleft the heart of the first archer. Before his body touched the floor the same bow sang once more.

A second shaft leaped into sight deep within the left side of the wounded girl.

"Good!" laughed the king, and wiped away a merry tear.

"Our lord has granted death!" chanted the Chinese. "Praise him!"

"Praise him!" echoed the bowmen and the cup maidens.

But Kenton, mad with swift rage at that heartless killing, leaped forward. Instantly the bow strings of the six and thirty archers before him were drawn taut, arrow shafts touched ears. Black priest and captain caught him, threw him down.

"Not so easily do you die!" Klaneth rumbled and set heavy foot on his throat.

The Chinese drew a small hammer and struck the blade of his sword. It rang like a bell. Two slaves came out on the dais and carried the dead girl away. Another girl took her place. The slaves dragged off the dead archer. Another slipped through the curtains and stood where he had stood.

"Let him up," crowed the king, cheerily—and drained his filled flagon.

"Lord—he is my slave." All the black priest's will could not

keep the arrogant impatience out of his voice. "He is my slave to do with as I will. He has been brought before you in obedience to your general command. You have seen him. Now I claim my right to take him to his place of punishment."

"Oh-ho!" The king set down his cup, beamed at Klaneth jovially. "Oh-ho! Sh-so you *won't* let him up? And you *will* take him away? Oh-ho!

"Toe nail of a rotting flea!" he shrilled, body rocking. "Am I Lord of Emakhtila or am I not? Answer me!"

From all around the king's chamber came the sigh of tight drawn bow strings. Every arrow of the silver and scarlet frieze of bowmen was pointed at the black priest's great body. The captain threw himself down beside Kenton.

"Gods!" muttered that soldier. "Hell take you and the reward! Why did I ever see you!"

Came the black priest's voice, strangled between rage and fear—

"Lord of Emakhtila you are!"

He knelt. The king waved his hand. The bow strings dropped loose.

"Stand up!" cried the king. The three arose. The Lord of Emakhtila shook a finger at Kenton.

"Why were you so angered," he chuckled, "by my boon of death to those two? Man—how many times, think you, will you beseech death to come and pray for my swift archers before Klaneth is done with you?"

"It was wanton slaughter," said Kenton, eyes steady on the watery ones.

"My cup must be kept filled," laughed the king. "The girl knew the penalty. She broke my law. She was slain. I am just."

"The lord is just!" chanted the Chinese.

"He is just!" echoed the archers and the cup maidens.

"The bowman made her suffer when I meant painless death

for her. Therefore he was slain," said the king. "I am merciful."

"Our lord is merciful!" chanted the Chinese.

"He is merciful!" echoed the bowmen and the cup maidens.

"Death!" The king's face wrinkled jovially. "Why, man—death is the first of boons. It is the one thing that the gods cannot cheat man out of. It is the one thing that is stronger than the fickleness of the gods. The gods give and the gods take away. But one thing they cannot take away—death. It is the only thing that is man's own. Above the gods, heedless of the gods, stronger than the gods—since even gods in their due time must die!

"Ah!" sighed the king—and for a fleeting instant all King Cole's jocundity was gone and in its place the face of a very weary, a sad, a very wise and three-fourths drunken old man—"Ah! There was a poet in Chaldea when I dwelt there—a man who knew death and how to write of it. Maldronah, his name. None here knows him—"

And then softly, as though he were quoting the words:

" 'Tis better be dead than alive, he said—
But best is never to be!"

Kenton listened, interest in this strange personality banishing his loathing. He knew Maldronah of ancient Ur; had run across that very poem from which the king had quoted while going through some of the inscribed clay tablets recovered by Heilprecht in the sands of Nineveh—back in that old life, half forgotten. He had translated for his own amusement; even turned the lines into verse of his own tongue. And involuntarily he spoke the beginning of the last macaberesque stanza:

"Life is a game, he said;
Its end we know not—nor care,
And we yawn ere we come to its end—"

"What!" the king cried. "You know Maldronah! You—"

Old King Cole again, he shook with laughter.

"Go on!" he ordered. Kenton felt the bulk of Klaneth beside him tremble with wrath, impatience. And Kenton laughed, too—meeting the twinkling eyes with eyes as merry; and as the King of the Two Deaths beat time with cup and flagon he finished Maldronah's verse with its curious jigging lilt entangled in slow measure of *marche funerale*:

"Yet it pleases to play with the snare,
To skirt the pit, and the peril dare,
And lightly the gains to spend;
There's a door that has opened, he said,
A space where ye may tread—
But the things ye have seen and the things ye have done,
What are these things when the race is run
And ye pause at the farthest door?
As though they never had been, he said—
Utterly passed as the pulse of the dead!
Then tread on lightly with nothing to mourn!
Shall he who has nothing fear for the score?
Ah—better be dead than alive, he said—
But best is ne'er to be born!"

Long sat the king in silence. At last he stirred, raised his flagon and beckoned one of the maidens.

"He drinks with me!" he said, pointing to Kenton.

The archers parted; let the cup maiden pass. She stood before Kenton; held the flagon to his lips. He drank deep; lifted head and bowed thanks to the Lord of Emakhtila.

"Klaneth," said the king, "no man who knows Maldronah of Ur is a slave."

"Lord," answered the black priest, and plainly he was uneasy — "Yet this man belongs to me."

The king sat silent, drinking now from cup and now from flagon; eyes now on Kenton, now on Klaneth.

"Come here," he ordered at last—and pointed with one finger at Kenton, with another at the side of the Chinese.

"Lord!" said Klaneth, more uneasily yet stubbornly. "My slave stays beside me."

"Does he?" laughed the king. "Ulcer on a gnat's belly! Does he? Or does he come to me as I command?"

All around the chamber the bow strings sighed.

"Lord," said Klaneth, with bowed head. "He goes to you."

As he passed him, Kenton heard the black priest's teeth grate; heard him pant as does a man after a long race. And Kenton, laughing, stepped through the opened space of archers; stood before the king.

"Man who knows Maldronah," chuckled the king. "You wonder how I, alone, have greater power than these priests and all their gods. Well—it is because in all Emakhtila I am the one man who has neither gods nor superstitions. I am the one man who knows there are only three realities. Wine—which up to a certain point makes man see more clearly than the gods. Power—which being combined with man's cunning makes him superior to the gods. Death—which no god can abolish and which I deal at will."

"Wine! Power! Death!" chanted the Chinese.

"These priests have many gods—each of them jealous of all the others. Ho! Ho!" laughed the king. "I have no gods. Therefore I am just to all. The just judge must be without prejudice; without belief."

"Our lord is without prejudice!" chanted the Chinese.

"He has no beliefs!" intoned the bowmen.

"I am on one side of the scales," said the king. "On the other

side are many gods and priests. There are only three things that I am sure are real. Wine, power, death! Those who try to outweigh me have beliefs many times three. Therefore I outweigh them. If there were but one god, one belief opposite me—lo, I would be outweighed! Yea—three to one! That is paradox—also it is truth."

"The Lord of Emakhtila speaks truth!" whispered the bowmen.

"Better three straight arrows in your quiver than three score crooked ones. And if there should arise one man in Emakhtila with but one arrow and that arrow straighter than my three—that man would soon rule in my place," beamed the king.

"Archers—hear ye the lord!" chanted the Chinese.

"And so," the king said, briskly, "since all the gods and all the priests were jealous of each other, they made me—who give not a curse for any god or priest—Lord of Emakhtila—to keep peace among them and hold them back from destroying each other! And this, since I now have ten bowmen to every one of theirs, and twenty swordsmen to each swordsman of the priests, I do very well. Ho! Ho!" laughed the king. "That is power."

"Our lord has power!" cried the Chinese.

"And having power I can get drunk at will," chuckled the king.

"Our lord is drunken!" whispered the archers, all around the chamber.

"Drunk or sober—I am King of the Two Deaths!" tittered the ruler of Emakhtila.

"The Two Deaths!" whispered the archers, nodding to each other.

"To you—man who knows Maldronah—I unveil them," said the king, grinning at Kenton.

"Bowmen at sides and back—bend your heads!" shouted the

Chinese. The heads of the archers along three sides of the living frieze dropped immediately upon their breasts.

The veils slowly fell from the shape upon the left hand of the king.

There, looking at Kenton with deep eyes in which were tenderness of the mother, shyness of the maid, passion of the beloved mistress, stood a woman. Her naked body was flawless. In it harmonies of mother, maid and mistress flowed in one compelling chord. From her breathed all springtides that ever caressed earth. She was the doorway to enchanted worlds, the symbol of everything that life could offer both of beauty and of joy. She was all the sweetnesses of life, its promises, its ecstasies, its lure and its reason. Looking on her Kenton knew that life was something to be held fast. That it was dear and filled with wonders. Exquisite —not to be let go!

And that death was very dreadful!

He had no desire toward that woman's shape. But she fanned to roaring flame desire for life in full continuance.

In her hand she held a strangely shaped instrument, long, with sharp fangs and rows of tearing claws.

"She is not entirely human—I invented her," said the king, complacently. "For I, too, was once a great sorcerer—before I learned that only in simplicity lay true strength."

"Strength!" intoned the Chinese.

"To her," chuckled the king, "I give only those whom I greatly dislike. She kills them slowly. Looking upon her, they cling to life; fiercely, terribly they cling to it. Each moment of life that she draws from them with those claws and teeth is an eternity through which they battle against death. Slowly she draws them out of life—wailing, clinging to it, turning stubborn faces from death! And now—look!"

The veils fell from the shape at his right hand.

There crouched a black dwarf, misshapen, warped, hideous.

He stared at Kenton out of dull eyes that held every sorrow and sadness and disillusionment of life; held all life's uselessness, its weariness, its empty labor. And looking at him, Kenton forgot that other shape—knew that life was dreadful, not to be borne.

And that death was the one good thing man had!

In one hand the dwarf held a slender sword, rapier thin, needle pointed. He had increasing desire to hurl himself upon that sword—die upon it!

"To him," laughed the king, "I give those who have greatly pleased me. Swift is their death and a sweet cup to their lips. Him also I made."

"You there—" The king pointed to the captain who had trapped Kenton. "Not too pleased am I with you for taking this man who knows Maldronah, even if he be Klaneth's slave. Go up before my left hand death!"

Face bloodless white, the captain marched to the steps; rigid he marched through the archers, marched without pause until he stood before the death. The Chinese struck his sword. Two slaves entered, heads bent low, carrying a lattice of metal. They stripped the captain of his armor, strapped him naked to the grate. The woman shape leaned over him, tenderness, love, all life's promise in her deep eyes, her wondrous face. She thrust the fanged instrument against his breast—so lovingly!

From his lips came a shrieking, anguished, despairing; prayers and curses; the wailing of the newly damned.

Still the woman shape leaned over him, smiling, tender, her eyes brooding upon his.

"Let be!" giggled the king. She lifted the thing of torment from the soldier's breast. Bent to her veils and threw them over her again. The slaves unbound the captain; dressed his shaking body. Sobbing, tears streaming, he staggered back, sank on knees at the black priest's side.

"I am displeased," said the king, merrily. "Yet you did your

duty. Therefore—live for a while, since that is your desire. I am just."

"Just is the lord," echoed the chamber.

"You—" he pointed to the archer who had slain cup maiden and fellow bowman—"I am much pleased with you. You shall have your reward. Come to my right hand death!"

Slowly at first the archer stepped forward. Faster he moved as the dull eyes of the dwarf met his and clung to them. Faster and faster—he raced up the steps, hurling the archers aside and leaped upon the slender sword!

"I am generous," said the king.

"Our lord is generous!" intoned the Chinese.

"Generous!" whispered the bowmen.

"I am thirsty," laughed the king. He drank deep from left hand and right. His head nodded; he swayed a bit; quite drunkenly.

"My command!" He opened and closed one twinkling eye after the other. "Hear me, Klaneth! I am sleepy. I will sleep. When I awaken—bring this man who knows Maldrōnah to me again. Let no harm come to him before then. It is my command. Also he shall have a guard of bowmen. Take him away. Keep him safe. It is my command!"

He reached for his cup. It dropped from his lax hand.

"By my deaths!" he whimpered, "if I could but hold more wine!"

He sank down upon the divan.

The King of the Two Deaths snored.

"Our lord sleeps!" chanted the Chinese, softly.

"He sleeps!" whispered bowmen and cup maidens.

The Chinese arose, bent over the king. He raised him on his shoulders like a child. The two and ten archers upon the lowest step turned, marched up and circled the two. The four and twenty turned, marched up and circled them. The bowmen

beside the curved wall swung round and six abreast marched up the steps. The living frieze of scarlet and silver swung six by six out from their walls and followed them.

The double ring within which were sleeping king and the Chinese stepped forward, passed through the curtains at the rear. After them strode the bowmen.

Six fell out of the ranks, ranged themselves beside Kenton.

The cup maidens picked up ewers and bowls. They tripped through the curtains.

Upon the stage were now only the Two Deaths, veiled, silent, motionless.

The bowmen pointed to the lower floor. Kenton walked down the steps.

Black priest on one side of him, white faced captain on the other, three archers marching before them, three after them, he passed out of the judgment chamber of the king.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THEY TOOK KENTON TO A NARROW, WINDOWLESS ROOM. ITS heavy door was solid bronze. Around its sides ran stone benches. In its center was another bench shaped like a sarcophagus. The bowmen sat him on it, tied his ankles with leathern thongs, threw cloaks on its top and pressed him down upon them. They seated themselves two by two on three sides of the room, eyes fixed on black priest and captain, bows ready.

The captain tapped the black priest on the shoulder.

"My reward?" he asked. "When do I get it?"

"When the slave is in my hands and not before," answered Klaneth, savagely. "If you had been—wiser, you would have had it by now."

"Yes—and much good it would be doing me, with an arrow through my heart or—" he shuddered—"wailing even now at the feet of the king's death!"

The black priest looked at Kenton evilly; bent over him.

"Put no hope in the king's favor," he muttered. "It was his drunkenness that was speaking. When he awakens he will have

forgotten. Give you to me without question. No hope there—you dog!"

"No?" sneered Kenton, meeting the dead malignant eyes steadily. "Yet twice have I beaten you—you black swine."

"But not a third time," spat Klaneth. "And when the king awakens I will have not only you but that temple drab you love! Ho!" rumbled the black priest as Kenton winced, "that touches you, does it? Yes, I will have you both. And together you shall die—slowly, ah, so slowly, watching each other's agonies. Side by side—side by side until slowly, slowly, my torturers have destroyed the last of your bodies. Nay, the last of your spirits! Never before has man or woman died as you two shall!"

"You cannot harm Sharane," answered Kenton. "Carrion eater whose filthy mouth drips lies! She is Bel's priestess and safe from you."

"Ho!" grunted Klaneth; then bent, whispering close in Kenton's ear so softly that no one but him could hear. "Listen—here is a sweet thought to carry you while I am away. Only if the priestess is faithful to the god is she beyond my reach. Now listen—listen— Before the king awakes your Sharane shall have taken another lover! Yea!"—devilish mockery was in the whisper— "Your love shall lie in arms of earthly lover! And he will not be—you!"

Kenton writhed helplessly, striving to break his bonds, tear at the evil face.

"Sweet Sharane!" whispered Klaneth, leering. "Holy Vase of Joy! And mine to break as I will—before the king awakes!"

He stepped back to the soldier who had taken Kenton.

"I go to await the king's awakening," he said. "Come."

"Not I," answered the soldier, hastily. "By the gods, I prefer this company. Also, if I lose sight of this man, priest—I might forever lose sight of that reward you owe me for him."

"Give me his sword," ordered Klaneth, reaching toward the blade of Nabu which the officer had retained.

"The sword goes with the man," answered the officer, setting it behind him.

"That is true," the bowmen nodded to each other. "Priest, you cannot have the sword."

Klaneth snarled; his hands flew out to clutch. Six bows bent, six arrows pointed at his heart. Without word, but with hell stamped deep on his brow, the black priest strode out of the cell. An archer arose, dropped into place a bar, sealing the door. A silence fell. The soldier brooded; now and then he shivered as though cold, and Kenton knew he was thinking of that death who with smiling, tender eyes had pressed teeth of torture in his breast. The six bowmen watched him unwinkingly.

And at last Kenton closed his own eyes—fighting to keep back the terror of Klaneth's last threat against his beloved; fighting against despair. What evil plot had the black priest set going against her, what trap had he laid, to make him so sure that soon he would have her in his hands—to break! And where were Gigi and Sigurd and Zubran? Did they know he was taken? A great loneliness swept over him.

How long his eyes were closed, or whether he had slept—he never could tell. But he heard as though from infinite distances away a still, passionless voice.

"Arise!" it bade him.

He opened his lids; lifted his head. A priest stood beside him, a priest whose long blue robes covered him from head to foot. Nothing could he see of that priest's face.

Suddenly he knew that his arms and ankles were free. He sat up. Ropes and thongs lay on the floor. On the stone benches the bowmen leaned one against the other asleep. The officer was asleep.

The bar on the door was still in place!

Then how had the blue priest entered? He got upon his feet, tried to look beneath the hood. The priest pointed to his sword, the sword of Nabu lying across the sleeping soldier's knees. He took it. The priest pointed to the bar that held the door. Kenton lifted it and swung the door open. The blue priest glided through the doorway, Kenton close behind. Again the priest pointed to the door and now he saw that on the outer side was a similar bar, fastening the cell from without. Softly Kenton dropped it into place.

The blue priest nodded, beckoned. Quickly he drifted along the corridor for a hundred paces or so and then pressed against what, to Kenton's sight, was black wall. A panel opened. Through it went the priest with Kenton following. Now they stood in a long corridor, dimly lighted—but how lighted he could not tell, since no lamps nor other lights were there. Along it they went, in a great curve. It came to Kenton that this hidden passage followed the huge arcs of the temple, that it must run close behind the temple's outer wall.

Now a massive bronze door closed the way. The blue priest seemed only to touch it. Yet it swung open; closed behind them.

Kenton stood in a crypt some ten feet square. At one end was the massive door through which he had come; at the other was a similar one. At his left was a ten-foot slab of smooth, pallid stone. And now the blue priest spoke—if indeed it were he speaking, since the passionless, still voice Kenton heard seemed, like that which had bidden him arise, to come from infinite distance.

"The mind of the woman you love—sleeps!" it said. "Remember that. She is a woman walking in dream—moving among dreams that other minds have made for her. Evil creeps upon her. It is not well to let that evil conquer—since should it, an ancient feud will surely blaze afresh consuming ere it ends, it may well be, both gods and men. Greater far is the issue here than the lives of this woman and of you. Yet that issue rests on

you—on your wisdom, your strength, your courage. Now when your wisdom tells you it is the time—open that farther door. Your way lies through it. And remember—her mind sleeps. You must awaken it—before the evil leaps upon her."

Something tinkled on the floor. At Kenton's feet lay a little wedge shaped key. He stooped to pick it up. As he raised his head he saw the blue priest beside the far door.

"Father," he said, and humbly. "Father! Strength I have and courage. But whether enough of wisdom—ah, that I do not know. But my heart is filled with thankfulness to you who have so helped me. May I not know whom to thank?"

He bent his head. There was a silence. Then—

"Nabu!" sighed the faraway voice.

Nabu—God of Wisdom! He had freed him, counseled him! Kenton raised his head, bent knee—

The blue priest seemed but a wisp of winddrawn smoke that, even as he looked, faded through the great bronze door and vanished!

BEFORE THE ALTAR OF BEL

Chapter Twenty-Six

NOW KENTON HEARD THE MURMUR OF MANY VOICES, MUFfled, vague. He slipped from door to door, listening. They were not within the passage. They seemed to seep through the slab of pallid, smooth stone. He placed an ear against it. The voices came to him more distinctly, but still he could distinguish no words. The stone must be exceeding thin here, he thought, that he could hear at all. He saw at his right a little shining lever. He drew it down.

A three-foot wide, misty disk of light began to glow within the stone. It seemed to eat through the stone; it flashed out, dazzlingly. Where the disk had been was a circular opening, a window. Silhouetted against it were the heads of a woman and two men. Their voices came now as clearly to his ears as though they stood beside him; over them came the wavelike murmur of a multitude. He drew back, fearing to be seen. The little lever snapped back into place. The window faded; with its fading the voices muted. He stared again at the smooth, pale wall.

Slowly he drew down the lever. Once more watched the ap-

parent burning out of the solid stone; saw the three heads reappear. He ran his free hand over the visible wall to the edge of the circle; higher he lifted it, into the disk itself. And ever he touched cold stone. Even that which was to his eyes an opening was to the questing fingers—stone!

He touched the whispering heads—and touched stone!

Now he understood—this was some device of the sorcerers—the priests. A device to give them a peeping place, a listening post, within the crypt. Some knowledge of the properties of light these priests must have, not yet learned by the science of Kenton's own world; control of a varying vibration that made the rock transparent from within but not from without. Whatever the secret, the stone was made as porous to the aerial waves of sound as to the etheric waves of light. Keeping his grip upon the handle, he peered out between the heads and over the shoulders of those so close to and still so unconscious of him.

The mists had lifted. They had become dense lurid clouds pressing down almost upon the top of the Zoned Temple. In front of him was a huge court paved with immense octagons of black and white marble. Trooping down upon this court like a forest of faery, halting in a wide semicircle around it, were hosts of slender pillars, elfin shafts all gleaming red and black whose tapering tops were crowned with carven, lace-tipped fronds glistening like gigantic ferns wet with dew of diamonds and sapphires. Upon the black and scarlet columns shone mysterious symbolings in gold and azure, in emerald and vermilion and silver. In halted myriads these pillars reached up toward the sullen, smouldering sky.

Hardly a hundred feet away was a golden altar, guarded by crouching cherubs, man-headed, eagle-winged, lion-bodied, carven from some midnight metal. They watched at each corner of the altar with cruel, bearded faces set between paws and as

alert as though alive. From the tripod on the altar a single slender crimson flame lifted, lance tipped and motionless.

In a vast crescent, a dozen yards in the van of the columns stood a double ring of bowmen and spearsmen. They held back a multitude; men and women and children pouring out of the ordered grove of pillars and milling against the soldiers like wind driven leaves against a wall. Score upon score they fluttered and whispered behind the double ring. Score upon score of men and women and children plucked from their own times and set down in this unknown, timeless world.

"The new priestess—they say she is very beautiful?" One of the men in front of Kenton had spoken. He was thin, white-faced, a Phrygian cap over his lank hair. The woman was of a bold and blown comeliness, black tressed, black eyed. The man at her right was an Assyrian, bearded, wolf visaged.

"She is a princess, they say," the woman spoke. "They say she was a princess in Babylon."

"Has she been here long?" asked the Phrygian. "I have just returned from a voyage—it was another princess when last I was here," he added, half apologetically.

"Long!" the woman laughed. "What is long or short in this place without time—this land where none dies unless slain?"

"Princess in Babylon!" echoed the Assyrian, wolf face softening, homesickness in his voice—"Oh, to be back in Babylon!"

"The Priest of Bel loves her—so they say," the woman broke the silence.

"The priestess?" whispered the Phrygian; the woman nodded. "But that is forbidden," he muttered. "It is—death!" The woman laughed again.

"Hush!" it was the Assyrian, cautioning.

"And the Lady Narada—the Holy Dancer—loves the priest!" the woman went on, unheeding. "And so—as always one must speed to Nergal!"

"Hush!" whispered the Assyrian.

"Will it be the—dancer?" asked the Phrygian.

"My little bed with the ivory feet that it will not," laughed the woman. The Assyrian's hand closed over her mouth.

There was a rumbling ruffle of drums, the sweet piping of a flute. He sought the sounds. His gaze rested on half a score of temple girls. Five crouched beside little tambours upon whose heads rested their rosy thumbs; two held to red lips pierced reeds; three bent over harps. Within their circle lay what at first seemed to him a mound of shimmering spider web spun all of threads of jet, in which swarms of golden butterflies were snared. The mound quivered, lifted—

The sable silken strands had meshed a woman, a woman so lovely that for a heartbeat Kenton forgot Sharane. Dark she was, with the velvety darkness of the midsummer night; her eyes were pools of midnight skies in which shone no stars; her hair was mists of tempests snared in nets of sullen gold. Sullen indeed was that gold, and in all of her something sullen that menaced the more because of its sweetness.

"*There* is a woman!" The bold eyes turned to the Assyrian. "*She'll* have what she wants—my bed on it!"

There came a voice from beside her, wistful, dreamy, worshipping:

"Ah, yes! But the new priestess—*She* is no woman! She is Ishtar!"

Kenton craned his neck, looking for the speaker. He saw a youth, hardly more than nineteen, saffron robed and slight. His eyes and face were those of a beautiful dreaming child.

"He is half mad," the dark woman whispered. "Ever since the new priestess came he haunts this place."

"We are going to have a storm. The sky is like a bowl of brass," muttered the Phrygian. "The air is frightened."

The Assyrian answered:

"They say Bel comes to his house in the storm. Perhaps the priestess will not be alone to-night."

The woman laughed slyly. Kenton felt swift desire to take her throat in his hands. There came a low clashing of thunder.

"Perhaps that is he, rising," said the woman, demurely.

There was a little throbbing of the harp strings; a complaining from the tambours. A dancing girl sang softly:

"Born was Nala for delight,
Never danced there feet so white;
Every heart on which she trod,
Dying owned her heel its god;
Sweet her kisses day or night—
Born was Nala for delight!"

The brooding eyes of the butterfly woman they had named Narada flashed angrily.

"Be quiet—wanton!" he heard her whisper. There was a ripple of laughter among the girls; the two with the pipes trilled them softly; the drums murmured. But she who had sung sat silent over her harp with downcast eyes.

The Phrygian asked:

"Is this priestess then really so beautiful?"

The Assyrian said:

"I do not know. No man has ever seen her unveiled."

The youth whispered:

"When she walks I tremble! I tremble like the little blue lake of the temple when the breeze walks on it! Only my eyes live, and something grips my throat."

"Peace!" a brown eyed girl with kindly face and babe in arms spoke. "Not so loud—or what you will feel at your throat will be an arrow!"

"She is no woman! She is Ishtar! Ishtar!" cried the youth.

The soldiers near by turned. Through them strode a grizzled officer, short sword in hand. Before his approach the others drew back; only the youth stood motionless. Right and left the sword carrier peered beneath bushy brows. Ere he could fix gaze on the youth a man in sailor's cap and tunic of mail had walked between the two, gripped the youth's wrist, held him hidden behind him. Kenton caught a glimpse of agate eyes, black beard—

His heart leaped. It was Zubran!

Zubran! But would he pass on? Could Kenton make him hear if he called? If his body could not be seen from without, could his voice penetrate the stone? Zubran!

The sword bearer scanned the silent group, uncertainly. The Persian saluted him gravely.

"Silence here!" grunted the officer at last, and passed back among his men.

The Persian grinned; pushed the youth from him; stared at the dark woman with eyes bolder than her own. He jostled the Phrygian from his place; laid a hand upon the woman's arm.

"I was listening," he said. "Who is this priestess? I am newly come to this land and nothing I know of its ways. Yet by Ormuzd!" He swore and thrust his arm around the woman's shoulders. "It was worth the journey to meet *you!* Who is this priestess that you say is so beautiful?"

"She is the keeper of Bel's House." The woman nestled close to him. "They say her name is—Sharane!"

"But what does she there?" asked Zubran. "Now if it were—you—I could understand without asking. And why does she come here?"

"The priestess lives in Bel's House upon the top of the temple," the Assyrian spoke. "She comes here to worship at his altar. When her worship is done she returns."

"For beauty such as you say is here," remarked Zubran, "her

world seems small indeed. Why, if she is so beautiful, is she content to dwell in so small a world?"

"She is the god's," answered the Assyrian. "She is the keeper of his house. If the god entered he might be hungry. There must be food for him in his house and a woman to serve it. Or he might be—"

"And so there must be a woman there," interrupted the bold eyed wench, smiling up at him slyly. "A fair woman. Therefore the priestess dwells within his house."

"We have something like that in my country." The Persian drew her closer. "But there the priestesses seldom wait alone. The priests see to that—Ho! Ho!"

God! Would the Persian ever come close to the wall? So close that Kenton might call to him. And yet—if he did! Would not those others hear him also—and then—

"Have any of these priestesses who—*wait*—" Zubran's voice purred—"Have any of these *waiting* priestesses ever—ah, entertained—the god?"

The youth spoke: "They say the doves speak to her—the doves of Ishtar! They say she is more beautiful than Ishtar!"

"Who?" asked the Persian.

"The Lady Sharane," sighed the youth.

Sharane! The name of his beloved pulsed through Kenton like little leaping flames.

"Fool!" whispered the Assyrian. "Fool, be still! Will you bring bad luck on us? No woman can be as beautiful as Ishtar!"

"No woman can be more beautiful than Ishtar," sighed the youth. "Therefore she is—Ishtar!"

The Phrygian said: "He is mad!"

But the Persian stretched out his right arm, drew the youth to him.

"Have any of these priestesses ever beheld the god?" he repeated.

"Wait," murmured the woman. "I will ask Narodach the archer. He comes sometimes to my house. He knows. He has seen many priestesses." She held the Persian's arm fast about her girdle, leaned forward—"Narodach! Come to me!"

An archer turned; whispered to the men on each side of him; slipped from between them. They closed up behind him, grinning.

"Narodach," asked the woman. "Tell us—have any of the priestesses ever beheld the god?"

The archer hesitated, uneasily.

"I do not know," slowly he answered at last. "They tell many tales. Yet—*are* they but tales? When first I came here there was a priestess in Bel's House. She was like the crescent moon of our old world. Many men desired her."

"Ho, archer," rumbled the Persian. "But did she—hold the god?"

Narodach said: "I do not know. They *said* so—they said that she had been withered by his fires. The wife of the charioteer of the Priest of Ninib told me that her face was very old when they took away her body. She was a date tree that had withered before it had borne fruit, she said."

"If *I* were a priestess—and so beautiful—*I* would not wait for the god!" The woman's eyes clung to Zubran. "*I* would have a man. Yea—I would have *many* men!"

"There was another who followed," said the archer. "She said the god had come to her. But she was mad—and being mad, the priests of Nergal took her."

"Give me men, I say!" whispered the woman.

Said Narodach the archer, musing: "One there was who threw herself from the temple. One there was who vanished. One there was—"

The Persian interrupted: "It seems that those priestesses who wait for Bel are not—fortunate."

Said the woman with intense conviction: "Give *me*—men!"

There was a nearer clashing of thunder. Above Kenton, in the lurid, ever darkening sky, the clouds began a slow churning.

"There will be a great storm," muttered the Phrygian.

The girl the Lady Narada had rebuked thrummed again her harp strings; sang half maliciously, half defiantly:

"Every heart that sought a nest,
Flew straightway to Nala's breast—
Born was Nala for delight—"

She checked her song. From afar came the faint sound of chanting; the tread of marching feet. Bowmen and spearsmen raised bows and spears in salute. Behind them the milling multitudes dropped to their knees. The Persian drew close to the wall. And his was the only head in the circular window whose pane was stone.

"Zubran!" called Kenton, softly. The Persian did not stir.

"Zubran!" shouted Kenton. The Persian turned startled face to the wall, then leaned against it, cloak tight around his face.

"Wolf!" There was relief and joy in Zubran's usually weary voice— "Are you safe? Where are you?"

"Behind the wall," shouted Kenton. "Whisper—I can hear you."

"I can barely hear you," whispered the Persian. "Are you hurt? In chains?"

"I am safe," cried Kenton. "But Gigi—Sigurd?"

"Searching for you," the Persian said. "Our hearts have been well-nigh broken. Soon we meet—"

"Listen," shouted Kenton. "There is a clump of trees—close to the stairway above the garrison—"

"We know," answered Zubran. "It is from them we make the steps and scale the temple. But you—"

"I will be in the House of Bel," cried Kenton. "Soon as the

storm breaks—go there. If I am not there—take Sharane, carry her back to the ship. I will follow."

"We will not go without you," whispered Zubran.

"Go—quick! Do as I say! Find Gigi—Sigurd!" shouted Kenton.

"I cannot go now. Patience, wolf! There is time!" answered Zubran.

"I hear a voice, speaking through the stone." It was the Assyrian, kneeling. Zubran dropped from Kenton's sight.

The chanting had grown louder; the marching feet were close. Then from some hidden entrance of the temple there swept out into the open space a company of archers and a company of swordsmen. Behind them paced as many shaven, yellow robed priests; swinging smoking golden censers and chanting as they walked. The soldiers formed a wide arc before the altar. The priests were silent upon a somber chord. They threw themselves flat on the ground.

Into the great court strode a single figure, tall as Kenton himself. A robe of shining gold covered him and a fold of this he held on raised left arm, completely covering his face.

"The Priest of Bel!" whispered the kneeling woman.

There was a movement among the temple girls. The Lady Narada had half risen. Kenton watched her, forgetting to breathe. Never had there been such yearning, such bitter-sweet desire as that in her midnight eyes as the Priest of Bel passed her, unheeding. Her long and slender fingers fiercely gripped the cobwebs that meshed her; their webs were lifted by the swelling breast of her; shuddered with the sighs that shook her.

The Priest of Bel reached the golden altar. He dropped the arm that held the shrouding fold. And then, prepared though he had been, Kenton's stiff fingers almost loosed the shining lever.

He looked, he thought, as in a mirror into his own face!

"ISHTAR! SHOW THY FACE!"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

BREATHLESSLY KENTON STARED AT THIS STRANGE TWIN. THERE was the same square jaw, firm-lipped dark face, the same clear blue eyes. What was the mystery of that resemblance? Chance—or illusion of sorcery?

Klaneth!

His mind groped toward the black priest's plot. Was this to be—Sharane's lover? Some flash of understanding half illumined his mind—too brief to be more than half caught. It left him groping again.

Through the stone he heard the Persian cursing. Then—

"Wolf, are you behind me?" he muttered. "Are you truly behind me, wolf?"

"Yes," he shouted. "I am here, Zubran. That is not I!"

His gaze flew back to the Priest of Bel; began now to take note of subtle differences in their two faces. The lips were not so firm, the corners of the mouth drew down; there was a hint of indecision about them and the chin. And the eyes were strained, shadowed with half wild, half agonized longing. Silent,

tense, the Priest of Bel looked over the lifted head of the Lady Narada, her lithe body as rigid as his own, unheeding her, intent upon that hidden portal through which he had come.

The lanced, crimson flame upon the altar flickered; swayed.

"The gods guard us!" he heard the bold-eyed woman say.

"Be silent! What is the matter?" said the Assyrian.

The woman whispered: "Did you see the Cherubs? They glared at the priest! They moved toward him!"

The woman with the babe said: "I saw it! I am frightened!"

The Assyrian said: "It was the light on the altar. It flickered."

Said the Phrygian, low: "Perhaps it was the Cherubs. Are they not Bel's messengers? Did you not say the priest loved Bel's woman?"

"Silence there!" rang the voice of the officer from behind the double ring. The priests began a low chanting. In the eyes of the priest a fire began to glow; his lips quivered; his body bent forward as though drawn by an unseen cord. Across the wide place came a woman—alone. She was cloaked from neck to feet in purple; her head was swathed in golden veils.

Kenton knew her!

His heart leaped madly toward her; his blood raced. He quivered under such a shock of longing that it seemed as though his leaping heart must perforce break beneath it.

"Sharane!" he called, forgetting; and again—"Sharane!"

She glided through the opened ranks of the men-at-arms kneeling to her as she passed. Straight to the altar she paced and stood there, silent, motionless beside the Priest of Bel.

Came a louder rolling of the metallic thunder. As it died away the priest turned to the altar, lifted his hands high. From his attendants droned a long, sustained humming upon a single deep note. Up and out swept the priest's arms; seven times he bowed low before the crimson flame. He stood upright. Down upon

their knees dropped archers and spearsmen; with a rustling of bows, a muffled beating of spear shafts.

Still to that weird humming the Priest of Bel began his invocation:

"O merciful among the gods!
O bullnecked among the gods!
Bel Merodach, king of the heavens and the worlds!
Heavens and earths are thine!
Breather of life art thou!
Thy house is prepared for thee!
We worship and await."

Kenton heard a whisper—tremulous, golden— "I worship and await!"

Sharane's voice! The golden voice of Sharane playing upon every taut nerve of him like myriads of little fingers over stretched harp strings!

Again the Priest of Bel:

"O begetter! O self-begotten!
O beautiful one who givest life to the Babe!
O merciful one who givest life to the dead!
King art thou of Ezida! Lord of Emakhtila!
A resting place for the King of Heaven is thy house!
A resting place for the Lord of Worlds is thy house!
We worship and await thee!"

And once more Sharane—tremulous— "I worship and await Thee!"

The priest intoned:

"Lord of the Silent Weapon!
Look favorably on thy house, O Lord of Rest!

May Ezida speak peace to thee in thy house!
May Emakhtila speak rest to thee in thy house!
We worship and await thee!"

And again Sharane! "I worship and await Thee!"

Now Kenton saw the priest make toward the altar a gesture in which lurked an inexplicable defiance. He turned and faced Sharane. His voice rang loudly, jubilantly:

"Full of delight is thy supremacy!
Opener of the lock of morning art thou!
Opener of the lock of evening art thou!
To open the Lock of the Heavens is thy supremacy!
I worship and await thee!"

At the first words the humming of the priests ceased; Kenton saw them stir, glance at each other uncertainly; saw a ripple pass through kneeling soldiers and worshippers as their heads raised; heard murmuring, astonished, uneasy.

Beneath him the kneeling Assyrian muttered: "That was not in the ritual!"

The Persian asked: "What was not in the ritual?"

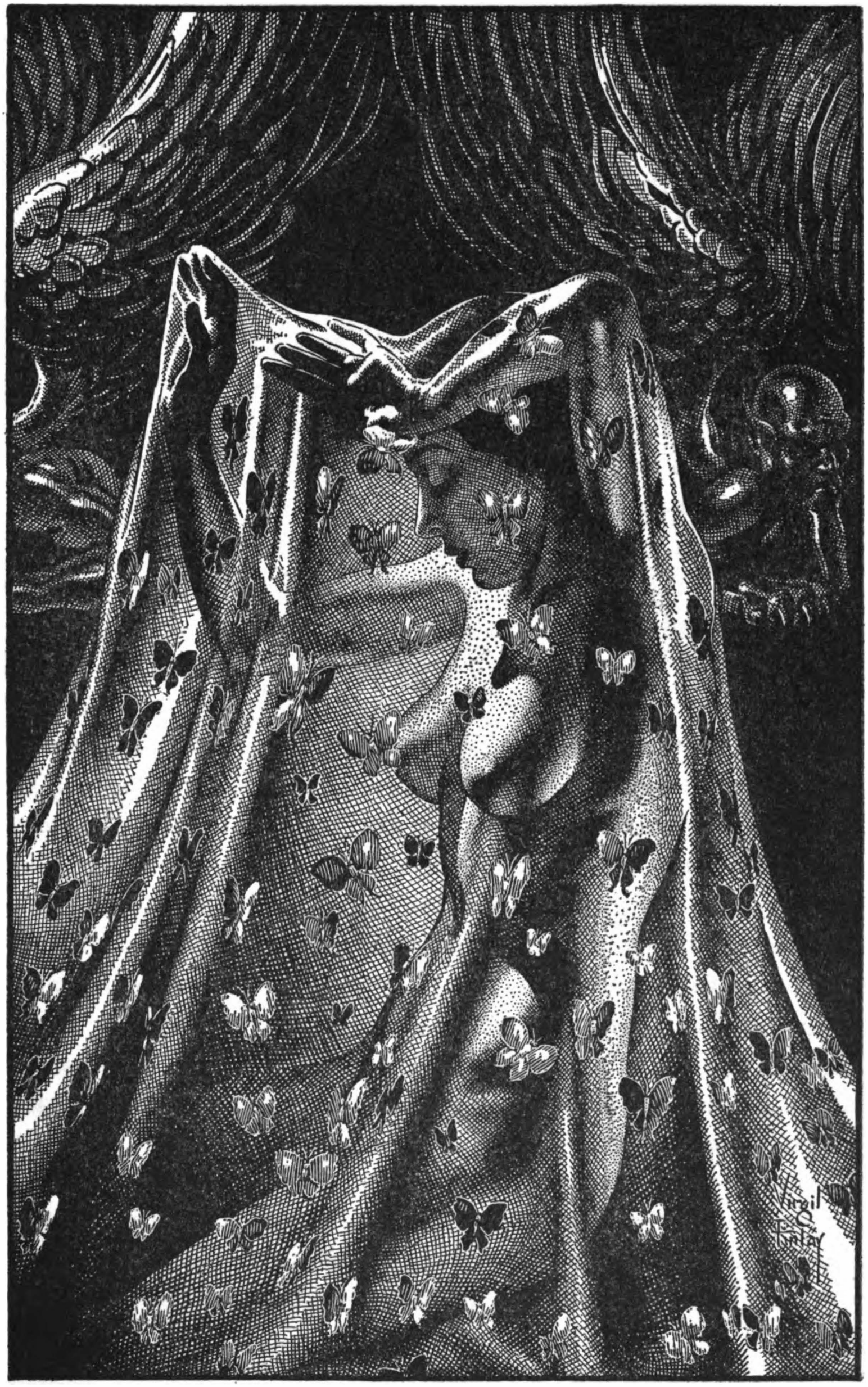
The woman said: "That the priest cried last. It is not Bel's. It belongs to Our Lady Ishtar!"

The youth whispered: "Yes! Yes—he knows her too! She *is* Ishtar!"

The woman with the babe sobbed: "Did you see the Cherubs stretch their claws? I am frightened. I am frightened, and it is not good for the child's milk. The light on the altar is like spilled blood!"

Said the Assyrian, uneasily: "I do not like it! It was not in Bel's ritual! And the storm is coming fast!"

The Lady Narada arose abruptly. Her handmaids bent over


Virgil Finlay

drums and harps; set their pipes to lips. A soft and amorous theme beat up from them, delicate, clinging—like the beating of the wings of countless doves, the clinging of countless little soft arms, the throbbing of countless little rosy hearts. Under it the body of the Lady Narada swayed like a green reed at the first touch of roving wings of spring. The multitude looked, sighed once and were still.

But Kenton saw that the priest's eyes never left Sharane, standing like a woman asleep beneath her veils.

Louder the music sounded; quicker, throbbing with all love longing, laden with all passion; hot as the simoom. To it, as though her body drank in each calling, imperious note, turned it into motion, made it articulate in flesh, the Lady Narada began to dance. Again Kenton, looking on her, forgot that lost love of his and now so near. For in the midnight eyes that had been so sorrowful, many little leaping joyous stars danced.

The scarlet mouth was a luring, honey-sweet flame promising unknown raptures; and the swarms of golden butterflies meshed within her gossamer nets of jet hovered, swept down, clung to and caressed the rose and pearl of her body as though she were some wondrous flower. They were clouds of golden butterflies darting upon her, covering with kisses all her lovelinesses gleaming within the cloudy nets that swirled about her, yet had no single exquisite curve. Maddening, breathless grew dance and music, and in music and dance Kenton watched mating stars, embracing suns, moons swollen with birth. Gathered in them he sensed all passion, all fire, white desire of all women under stars and suns and moons.

And the slumbrous fragrance of the withering passion flower!

The music slowed, softened; the dancer was still; from all the multitude a soft sighing arose. He heard Zubran, his voice hoarse:

"Who is that dancer? She is like a flame! She is like the flame

that danced before Ormuzd on the Altar of the Ten Thousand Sacrifices!"

The woman, jealously: "She danced the wooing of Bel by Ishtar. She has danced it many times. Nothing new in that."

The Phrygian said, maliciously: "He asked who she is?"

The woman said, spitefully: "Gods! That dance is no new thing, I tell you. Many women have danced it."

The Assyrian said: "She is the Lady Narada. She belongs to Bel."

The Persian said wrathfully: "Are all the fair women in this country Bel's? By the Nine Hells—Cyrus the King would have given ten talents of gold for her!"

"Hush!" whispered the Assyrian; and the other two echoed him— "Hush!"

The Lady Narada had begun once more to dance. The music grew louder. But now it was languorous; dripping sweetness; distilling the very dew of desire—but no longer desire seeking! No. Desire fulfilled!

And once more the Lady Narada was mated to the sounds; was one with them—the blood hammered hot in Kenton's veins—

"She dances the surrender of Ishtar to Bel!" It was the Assyrian, gloating.

The Persian stood upright.

"Aie!" he cried. "Cyrus would have given not ten but fifty talents of gold for her! She is a flame!" cried Zubran, and his voice was thick, clogged. "And if she is Bel's—why then does she look so upon the priest?"

None heard him in the roaring of the multitude; soldiers and worshippers, none of them had eyes or ears for anything but the dancer.

Nor had Kenton!

Then witchery of the midnight woman was broken from him;

raging at himself he beat against the stone. For the tranquillity of Sharane had broken. Her white hand thrust aside the shrouding purple folds. She turned; moved swiftly away toward that hidden entrance from which she had come.

The dancer stopped; the music died; again came the uneasy movement of the multitude; a louder murmuring.

"That was not in the ritual!" The Assyrian sprang to his feet. "The dance is not yet finished."

There was a clashing of thunder almost overhead.

"She grows impatient for the god, perhaps," the woman said, cynically. "Or perhaps she thinks he awaits her."

And again Kenton felt his hands tingle with the desire to strangle her.

"Lady Ishtar! Lady Ishtar!" he heard the youth cry out.

There was a louder murmuring about them; the soldiers turned, threateningly.

"She is Ishtar! She is the moon hiding her face behind a little cloud!" The youth took a step toward the men-at-arms guarding the priestess.

The bold-eyed woman arose, caught his arm; she spoke to the soldiers.

"He is mad! He lives at my house. Do not hurt him! I will take him away!"

But the youth broke away from her; thrust her aside; darted through the guards and raced across the square to meet the advancing priestess. He threw himself at her hurrying feet. He hid his face in the hem of her cloak. She paused, regarding him through her veils. Instantly Bel's priest was at her side. He thrust a foot against the youth's face, brutally; sent him rolling a yard away.

"Ho! Alrac! Druchar! Take this man!" he shouted. Two officers came running to him, swords drawn; the attendant priests clustered, whispering; all the multitude was silent. And like a

cat, the youth twisted, sprang upon his feet, faced the priestess.

"Ishtar!" he cried. "Show me thy face. *Then* let me die!"

She stood silent, as though she neither heard nor saw. The soldiers seized him, drew back his arms. And then, visibly, strength flowed into that slight frame. He seemed to expand, to grow in height. He threw the soldiers from him; he smote the Priest of Bel across the eyes. He gripped the veils of the priestess.

"I will not die until I see thy face, O Ishtar!" he cried—and so crying tore the veils away.

Where veils had been was the face of Sharane!

But not the Sharane of the ship—vital, filled with the fire of life. No!

Here was a Sharane of wide, unseeing eyes; upon whose white brow dream sat throned. A woman whose body moved through reality, but whose mind was freed of all that was real; a mind that floated through linked labyrinths of illusion.

Sharane—what had the blue priest said—a woman with a mind asleep!

The Priest of Bel's voice shrilled, vibrant with hate.

"Sacrilege! Slay that man!"

The swords of the two captains bit through the youth's breast.

He fell, still holding tight the veils. Sharane looked down upon him, unconcerned.

"Ishtar!" he gasped. "I have seen you—Ishtar!"

His eyes glazed. Sharane tore the veils from his stiffening hands; threw the tattered remnants over her face. Swiftly she swept on to the temple—was gone from Kenton's straining sight. The Priest of Bel watched her go, the hell in which his heart seethed blackening his face. His gaze dropped upon the twitching body of the youth; he stamped upon it; beckoned. Men came forward and dragged it away.

From the multitude a clamor arose. Archers and spearsmen began to push back the throng through the forest of the slender,

lacquered pillars; sifted among them; vanished with those they herded. Past the Priest of Bel went his soldiers and acolytes; and after them slipped the harpers, the pipers and the drum girls of the Lady Narada.

Within that vast court circled by the elfin shafts remained only dancer and priest. The lurid sky darkened steadily. The slow, churning movement of the clouds had become more rapid. Under the ocherous shadows the lanced flame on the altar of Bel shone brighter—angrily; like a lifted, scarlet sword. Around the crouching Cherubs the shadows thickened. The metallic thundering had become continuous, marching closer.

With the passing of Sharane, Kenton would have opened that other door of bronze. Something counseled him that the time had not yet come; that a little longer he must wait. And as he waited dancer and priest drifted to that strange window through which he peered.

Close to him they paused.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"BEL SHOULD BE PLEASED WITH HIS WORSHIP, PRIEST!" KENTON heard the dancer say.

The priest asked, dully: "What do you mean?"

The Lady Narada drew closer to him; her hands fluttered out to him.

"Shalamu," she whispered. "Did I dance for the god? You know I danced for—you. And whom did you worship, Shalamu? The god? No—the priestess. And whom, think you, did she worship?"

"She worshiped Bel! Our Lord Bel who has—all," the priest answered, bitterly.

Said the dancer, mockingly: "She worshiped herself, Shalamu!"

He repeated, stubbornly, wearily: "She worshiped Bel."

Closer came the Lady Narada, touched him with fluttering, yearning hands.

"Does any woman worship a god, Shalamu?" she asked. "Ah—no! I am a woman—and I know. This priestess would be a god's

woman—no man's. She holds herself too high, too precious, for man. She loves herself. She worships herself. She would bow down to herself as a god's woman. Women make gods of men and then love them. But no woman loves any god *she* has not made, Shalamu!"

The priest said, sullenly: "Well—I worshiped her!"

The dancer said, eagerly: "As she worshiped—herself! Shalamu—does she long to give joy to Bel? To our Lord Bel who has Ishtar? Can we give joy to the gods—to the gods who have all? The lotus rises to the sun—but is it to give joy to the sun that she rises? No! It is to give joy to herself. So the priestess! I am a woman—and I know."

Her hands were on his shoulders; he took them in his own: "Why do you say these things to me?"

She drew a step away from him.

"Shalamu!" she murmured. "Look in my eyes. Look on my mouth—my breast. Like the priestess I am the god's. But I give myself to you—beloved!"

He said, dreamily: "Yea—you are very beautiful!"

Her arms were round his neck, her lips close to his.

"Do I love the god?" she whispered. "When I dance is it to delight his eyes? It is for you I dance—beloved! It is for you I dare Bel's wrath—" Softly she drew his head down on her breast—"Am I not fair? Fairer than this priestess who is Bel's and worships herself nor will ever give herself to you? Are not my perfumes pleasing? No god possesses me—beloved!"

Dreamily he answered her again: "Yea—you are very fair."

"I love you—Shalamu!"

He thrust her from him; his eyes were full of dream and half he chanted: "Yet *her* eyes are like the Pools of Peace in the Valley of Forgetfulness! When she comes near me the doves of Ishtar beat their wings above my head! She walks upon my heart!"

The Lady Narada drew back, scarlet lips pale, brows a menacing straight line, agony in her eyes.

"The priestess?"

"The priestess," he answered. "Her hair is like the cloud that veils the sun at dusk. The wave of her robe scorches me as the wind from the desert noon scorches the palm. The wave of her robe makes me cold as the wind of the desert night makes cold the palm!"

"The priestess?" she asked again.

And as before he echoed: "The priestess!"

She said coldly, almost indifferently: "That youth was bolder far than you, priest."

Even in the growing dark Kenton saw the red rush through the priest's face. He caught her hands.

"What do you mean?" he snarled.

"Why did you have the youth slain?" Coldly as before came her voice.

He answered, hotly: "He did sacrilege! He—"

She stopped him, contemptuously: "Because he was bolder than you. Because he dared to tear the veils from her. Because he was brave and—wise. Because you knew yourself the coward. That is why you had him slain!"

His hands twitched to her throat: "You lie! You lie! I would dare!"

Again she laughed: "You did not even dare to slay him—*yourself!*"

His hands were at her throat; she thrust them carelessly aside.

"Coward!" she said. "*He* dared to lift the veil from what he loved. *He* dared the wrath both of Ishtar and of Bel!"

The priest cried, brokenly: "Would *I* not dare? Do *I* fear death? Do *I* fear Bel?"

Her eyes mocked him.

"Hai! You who love so greatly!" she taunted. "The priestess

awaits the god—in his lonely house! Perhaps he is not in the storm! Perchance he tarries with another maid— Oh, fearless one! Bold lover—take his place!"

He shrank back from her.

"Take—his—place!" he whispered, fear, awe—and dawning hope—in face and voice.

"You know where the armor of the god is hidden. Unless you *are* coward—take his place. Go to her as the god!" she said.

For a long moment the priest stood, quivering. Then Kenton saw irresolution fly; decision take its place. The priest strode to the altar—down went the lanced flame; wavered; died. In the sudden dark the crouching Cherubs seemed monstrously to take wing. There came a flash of the weird, prismatic lightning. By its irised flare he saw the Priest of Bel passing swiftly along that way Sharane had come and gone; saw the Lady Narada lying huddled in her nets of jet, the sipping flocks of golden butterflies at rest upon her; heard a low, heart-broken wailing.

Slowly Kenton's hand began to slip from the lever. Now was the time to use that key, pass on where the blue priest had pointed. His hand froze upon the lever.

A shadow, blacker than the dusk without, had passed the window; stood over the dancer; a huge and unwieldy bulk—familiar—

Klaneth!

"Good!" rumbled the black priest, and touched her with his foot. "Now soon neither he nor Sharane shall trouble you more. And you have well earned the reward I promised you."

The Lady Narada looked up at him with white and piteous face, stretched shaking hands out to him.

"If he had loved me," she wailed, "never would he have gone. If he had loved me but a little—never would I have let him go. But he angered me—he shamed me, throwing back to me the

love I offered him. Not for you, black snake, despite our bargain, did I send him to her—and to death!"

"Well," laughed Klaneth, "whatever your reason—you sent him! He is gone. And here is your reward."

He dropped a handful of flashing jewels into her outstretched palms. She screamed, opened fingers as though the gems burned her; they fell and rolled about the stones.

"If he had loved me! If he had loved me but a little!" sobbed the Lady Narada—and crouched again, a huddled heap, among her butterflies.

Again the black priest laughed; then hurried toward the temple.

Kenton, to him now clear all the black priest's plot, let the lever go; raced to the farther door of bronze, thrust the wedged key into it; slipped past the slowly opening edge, and ran down the passageway it had barred. Two flames burned in him as he raced along that passage—white flame of love for his woman, black flame of hate against Klaneth. He knew that wherever the Priest of Bel was bound—there must be Sharane. The black priest's plot had been well laid, the trap expertly baited. The end—unless Kenton could reach the Bower of Bel in time and conquer—inevitable.

It was the evil cunning of the black priest that had coached Narada. Not for an instant did he believe that the dancer's surrender of herself to the priest had been part of the plot. She loved him—there could be no doubt of that. And if he had not tossed that surrender back to her—

But he had rejected it, and in her shame and anger she had pointed out to him the way of possession of his god's priestess; had counseled him to the supreme sacrilege; had thrown him into the arms of Sharane for his own destruction—and hers!

Narada had repented—but too late! The black priest had gambled—and the black priest had won!

Kenton cursed as he ran. If Sharane, meshed in ensorcelled dream, saw the Priest of Bel as the god himself—still would she have taken earthly lover! Her innocence could not save her. Klaneth would see to that. He would hint of other visits—nay, without doubt would have witnesses to swear to them! And if Sharane should awaken—God! Would she not in the dawn of that awakening take the Priest of Bel for him—for Kenton!

But either way—the presence of priest and priestess in Bel's Bower would be enough to damn them both. Yes—Klaneth would see to that!

A hope came to him—Gigi, the Viking, the Persian! Might they not even now be climbing the outer stairway, slaying the sentries as they crept up?

Might they not reach Bel's Bower in time to save Sharane?

Also—never might they reach there! He must not let that hope take edge off his driving purpose—his fear! He himself must reach her in time. Had not the blue priest told him that the issue lay in his own hands; no others.

He crossed a traverse passage; ran blindly down a sloping corridor along whose sides glared guarding *chimeræ;* stopped in front of a wide portal from which hung, motionless and rigid, folds that seemed carved from solid silver. Caution whispered to him; he put out a hand, parted with a sense of profanation the metallic curtainings, peered within—

He looked into his own room!

Yes—there it lay before him, his old room in his old world! He saw the jeweled ship, glimmering, glittering—but as though he saw it through a fog; through a mist of fiery particles, half veiling it. The long mirror glinted behind that same luminous vapor. Infinitely small, in infinite numbers, the sparkling atoms hung between him and that room of his—back in New York!

And he—here in this strange world!

Misty was the room, nebulous, quivering now into plainer sight; now withdrawing into indefiniteness.

And as he stared at it, incredulous, the old bleak despair clutching him; he felt within his hands the curtains grow light as silken gauze, stiffen back into metal—alternately; slipped from his hands, strengthened within them as the room steadied in the sparkling mist, dissolved within it into phantom outlines!

Yet ever as the room swung inward clearer, swung back dimmer, the outlines of the jeweled ship hardened, crystallized, shone forth brighter—summoning him, dragging him back!

Chapter Twenty-Nine

KENTON BRACED HIMSELF; HELD TIGHT TO THE CURTAINS. HE fought with all his will to check their melting as his old room that held the jeweled ship swung between spectral unreality and hard actuality. The curtains were like bars between his old world and this of his great adventure; bars between the world of Sharane and the world he loathed.

A force, a pull like a strong undertow, dragged him forward irresistibly each time the curtains melted in his hands and the nebulous outlines of his room crisped into steadiness. And plainly he could pick out every detail of that room, the long mirror, the cabinets, the divan—the stains of his blood still wet upon the floor.

And always, whether room were melting mist or clear outline, the jeweled ship shone steadily—watchful!

Now he swung out and over that room; the ancient Chinese rug of its floor was below him—at once close and infinite distances away. He heard the first voices of the shrieking winds of space!

In that brief instant he realized that it was the shining toy itself drawing him out of the world of Sharane!

Something was reaching up and out to him from the dark deck of the ship! Something malignant and mocking—dragging him, dragging him to it!

The same thought he fleetingly had held when he had hovered over the real ship in its hidden harbor—no fleeting thought now, but certainty!

Darker grew the black deck—stronger its pull—

"Ishtar!" he prayed, gaze upon the rosy cabin. "Ishtar!"

Did the cabin flash as though filled with sudden light? A light which penetrated, numbed, the dark power dragging him to it?

The outlines of his room melted; again the curtains were heavy in his hands; he stood once more on firm feet at the threshold of the House of the Moon God.

Once, twice, thrice more the room pulled back—but each time less real, more spectral. And against each pulse Kenton set his will; closed eyes and thrust away the vision of it with all his strength; forced himself not to think of what that apparent resurgence of evil power on the black deck might mean; concentrated every thought, every atom of will on banishment of room and toy ship where they belonged—in his old world.

His soul for Sharane's! Never would he be drawn back there again!

His will won. The room vanished; in that evanishment a finality not to be mistaken. The spell was broken, the subtle links snapped. Now he could go on!

Caught by the reaction he clung to the curtains, knees weak and shaking. Slowly he found himself, resolutely parted the folds.

He looked now into a vast hall filled with mist of argent light; still was this mist, yet palpable—as though the rays that formed

it were woven. Interlaced and luminous, the webbed mist made of the chamber a home of immensities, of tremendous distance. He thought but was not sure, that there was motion within these silver webs—shadowy shapes half appearing, vanishing, never quite coming into full sight. Far away he caught another movement; a figure was coming forward; steadily, inexorably. It drew closer, slowly; it swam into sight—a man, golden-helmeted, over his shoulder a short cloak of gold shot through with scarlet, in his hand a golden sword; head bent, pushing on as though against some strong current.

It was the Priest of Bel clad in the raiment of his god!

Scarce breathing, Kenton watched him. The eyes so like his own were black with dread and awe—yet filled with will and purpose; indomitable. The mouth was set, the lips white, and in all the priest's body Kenton sensed a tremor, a shuddering—deep as the priest's soul. Whether real or but phantoms, he knew the terrors of this place were realities to the priest. With a thrill of ungrudging admiration he paid tribute to the courage that dared those terrors while masquerading in sacrilegious semblance of the god to whom the priest was traitor and whose greater betrayal was the purpose of his pilgrimage!

The Priest of Bel passed, and Kenton, waiting until he was half hidden in the shining mists, slipped through the curtains; followed him.

Now Kenton heard a voice; a still voice, passionless as that which had bidden him arise from his bed of stone; and like that voice neither was it the place wherein he trod nor within him. It was as though borne to him out of farthest flung space—

The voice of Nabu, God of Wisdom!

Listening, he felt himself not one man but three—a single purposed Kenton who followed the priest and would follow him through hell so he led to Sharane; a Kenton who, tied by some inexplicable link to the mind of the priest, felt and saw and

heard, suffered and feared even as he; and a Kenton who hearkened to the words of Nabu as coldly, as dispassionately as they were uttered, watched as coldly, as detachedly, all they pictured.

"The House of Sin!" the voice rang. "Chief of the Gods! Nannar! Begetter of Gods and men! Lord of the Moon! Lord of the Brilliant Crescent! Great of Horns! Nannar! Perfect of Form! Decreer of Destiny! Self Created! Whose House is the first of the Zones and Whose Color is Silver!

"He passes through the House of Sin!

"He goes by the altars of chalcedon and of sard which are set with the great moonstone and with rock crystals, the altars where burn the white flames from which Sin the Fashioner created Ishtar! He sees the pale and shining serpents of Nannar writhe toward him and from the silver mists that veil the crescented horns of Sin he sees the winged white scorpions dart upon him!

"He hears the sound of the tramping of myriads of feet, the feet of all the men to be born beneath the Moon! And he hears the sound of the sobbing of myriads of women, the sobbing of all the women to be born and to bear! He hears the clamor of the Uncreate!

"And he passes!

"For Lo! Not the Begetter of Gods nor the awe of him may stand before man's desire!"

So the voice rang—and was silent. And Kenton saw all these things, saw the shimmering white serpents writhe through the silver mists and strike at the priest; saw the winged scorpions dart upon him; visioned within the mists a vast and awful shape upon whose clouded brows the crescent of the moon was bound. In his own ears he heard the tramping of armies of the unborn, the sobbing of worlds of women yet unborn, the clamor of the Uncreate! Saw and heard—even, he knew, as did the Priest of Bel!

And unshaken, followed.

The golden helm flashed, high above him. Kenton paused at the base of a winding stairway whose broad steps circled upward, changing as they arose from pallid silver to glowing orange. He waited until the priest—never hastening, never looking back—had ascended; he passed into the place to which the stairway led; slipped after him.

He looked into a temple filled with crocused light even as that through which he had just come had been filled with webs of moonbeams. A hundred paces away marched the priest, and as Kenton moved on the still voice resumed its whispering:

"The House of Shamash! Offspring of the Moon! God of the Day Dweller in the House of Luster! Banisher of Darkness! King of Judgment! Judge of Mankind! On Whose Head Resteth the Crown with the High Horns! In Whose Hands are Life and Death! Who Cleanseth Man with His Hands Like a Tablet of Burnished Copper! Whose House is the Second of the Zones and Whose Color is Orange!

"He passes through the House of Shamash!

"Here are the altars of opal set with diamonds and the altars of gold set with amber and the yellow sunstones. Upon the altars of Shamash burn sandalwood and cardamon and verbena. He goes by the altars of opal and of gold; and he goes by the birds of Shamash whose heads are wheels of flame and who guard the wheel that turns within the House of Shamash and is a potter's wheel upon which all the souls of men are shaped.

"He hears the noise of myriads of voices, the wailing of those who have been judged and the shouting of those who have been judged!

"And he passes!

"For Lo! Not the King of Judgment nor the fear of him may stand before man's desire!"

Again Kenton saw and heard all these things; and following

the priest came to a second stairway whose steps merged from glowing orange into ebon black. And still following he stood, at last, in a great hall of gloom, the name of whose dread master he knew even before the still voice came murmuring to him out of hidden, secret space:

"The House of Nergal! The Mighty One of the Great Dwelling Place! King of the Dead! He who Scattereth the Pestilence! He Who Ruleth over the Lost! The Dark One without Horns! Whose House is the Third of the Zones and whose Color is Black!

"He passes through the House of Nergal!

"He goes by Nergal's altars of jet and of bloodstone! He goes by the red fires of civet and of bergamot that burn thereon! He goes by the altars of Nergal and the lions that guard them, and the black lions whose eyes are as rubies and whose claws are blood red, the red lions whose claws are as black iron and whose eyes are as jet; and he passes the sable vultures of Nergal whose eyes are as carbuncles and whose heads are the fleshless heads of women!

"He hears the whimpering of the People of the Great Dwelling Place and he tastes the ashes of their passion!

"And he passes!

"For Lo! Not the Lord of the Dead nor the dread of him may swerve man from his desire!"

Now the steps of the stairway by which Kenton ascended from the House of Nergal faded from ebon into crimson; and fiery, wrathful scarlet was the light that filled the place in which he stood, watching the Priest of Bel go steadily on.

"The House of Ninib!" whispered the voice. "Lord of Spears! Lord of the Battle! Master of the Shields! Master of the Hearts of Warriors! Ruler of the Strife! Destroyer of Opposition! Breaker of the Lock! The Smiter! Whose Color is Scarlet, Whose House is the Fourth of the Zones!

"Of shields and of spears are builded the altars of Ninib and their fires are fed with the blood of men and the tears of women, and upon the altars of Ninib burn the gates of fallen cities and the hearts of conquered kings! He goes by the altars of Ninib. He sees threaten him the crimson fangs of the boars of Ninib whose heads are wreathed with the right hands of warriors, the crimson tusks of the elephants of Ninib whose feet are ankleted with the skulls of kings, and the crimson tongues of the snakes of Ninib which lick up the cities!

"He hears the clashing of spears, the smiting of swords, the falling of walls, the crying of the conquered!

"And he passes!

"For Lo! Since ever man was, the altars of Ninib have been fed with the fruits of man's desire!"

Upon the fourth stairway he set his feet; ascended steps that ran from the vermilion of licking flame to the clear, serene blue of untroubled skies; stood within a chamber all filled with calm, azure light. Closer now seemed the voice.

"The House of Nabu! Lord of Wisdom! Bearer of the Staff! Mighty One of the Waters! Lord of the Fields Who Openeth up the Subterranean Streams! The Proclaimer! He who Openeth the Ears of Understanding! Whose Color is Blue and Whose House is the Fifth of the Zones!

"The altars of Nabu are of blue sapphire and of emerald and from them shine clear amethysts! The flames that burn on the altars of Nabu are blue fires in whose light only the truth has shadows! And the flames of Nabu are cold flames nor is there any scent over his altars! He passes by the altars of sapphire and of emerald and their cold fires! He passes the fishes of Nabu which have women's breasts but silent mouths! He passes the seeing eyes of Nabu which look forth from behind his altars and he touches not the staff of Nabu which holdeth up with wisdom the feet!

"Yea—he passes!

"For Lo!—when did Wisdom stand before man's desire!"

Up from the blue of Nabu's House went the priest, and behind him on a stairway that merged from sapphire into rosy pearl and ivory climbed Kenton. Little, caressing tendrils of incense reached out to him as he went and all about him beat little languorous, linked notes of amorous sound; coaxing, calling; infinitely alluring, perilously sweet. Slowly, slowly Kenton followed him, listening to the voice, yet half heeding it, half forgetful of his quest, struggling with a vast desire to heed the calling, linked and amorous music; surrender to the spirit of this ensorcelled chamber—go no further—forget—Sharane!

"The House of Ishtar!" came the voice. "Mother of the Gods and of Men! The Great Goddess! Lady of the Morning and of the Evening! Full Bosomed! The Producer! She Who Hearkeneth to Petition! The Mighty Weapon of the Gods! She Who Slayed and She Who Created Love! And the House of Ishtar is the Sixth of the Zones!

"He passes through the House of Ishtar! Of white marble and of rose coral are her altars and the white marble is streaked with blue like a Woman's breast! Upon her altars burn ever myrrh and frankincense, attar and ambergris! And the altars of Ishtar are set with pearls both white and rose, with hyacinths and with turquoise and with beryls!

"He goes by the altars of Ishtar, and, like the pink palms of maidens desirous, the rose wreaths of the incense steal toward him. The white doves of Ishtar beat their wings about his eyes! He hears the sound of the meeting of lips, the throbbing of hearts, the sighs of women, and the tread of white feet!

"Yet he passes!

"For Lo! Whenever did love stand before man's desire!"

From that chamber of amorous witcheries the stairway climbed, reluctant; shifting from its rosy pearl to flaming, flash-

ing gold. And scaling it he stood within another vast place radiant as though it were the heart of the sun. Half blinded by the brilliancy, straining his eyes for the priest he saw merged and almost invisible in the golden light. Faster and faster the priest moved onward as though all his terrors were concentrated, crowding upon his hurrying heels!

"The House of Bel!" rang the voice. "Merodach! Ruler of the Four Regions, Lord of the Lands! Child of the Day! Bull Necked! Elephant Thewed! Mighty One! Conqueror of Tiamat! Lord of the Igigi! King of Heavens and of Earth! Bringer of Things to Completeness! Lover of Ishtar!

"Bel-Merodach, Whose House is the Seventh of the Zones, and Whose Color is Golden!

"Swiftly he passes through the House of Bel!

"The altars of Bel are of gold and rayed like the sun! On them burn the golden fires of the summer lightnings and the smoke of the incense hangs over them like the clouds of the thunderstorm! The Cherubs whose bodies are lions and whose heads are eagle heads, and the Cherubs whose bodies are bulls and whose heads are the heads of men guard the golden altars of Bel, and both are winged with mighty wings! And the altars of Bel are reared upon thews of elephants and are held upon the necks of bulls and the paws of lions!

"He goes by them! He sees the fires of the lightning sink and the altar shake! In his ears is the sound of worlds crushed by the fist of Bel; of worlds falling beneath the feet of Bel; of worlds breaking beneath the smiting of Bel!

"Yet he passes!

"For Lo! Not even the Might of God may crush the desire of man!"

The voice ceased; it seemed to retreat to those far regions whence it had come. In its withdrawal Kenton sensed finality; knew it would sound no more for him there; that now he was

thrown on his own wit and strength; must captain his own way henceforward.

Out from one side of the House of Bel jutted a squared buttress, perpendicular, fifty feet or more wide. It thrust itself into this temple within a temple like the gigantic pier of a bridge. Its top was hidden in the strange, shining mists.

Down its smooth façade darted a broad and angled streak of gold that Kenton for an instant took to be a colossal ornament, a symboling of the darting lightning bolt of Bel. Closer he came to it, following the priest. And now he saw that the golden streak was no ornament. It was a stairway, fashioned to represent the leaping levin but—a stairway! A steep stairway of sharply angled flights that clinging to the mighty buttress wall climbed from the floor of the House of Bel up to—what?

At the foot the priest of Bel faltered; for the first time he looked behind him; seemed half moved to retreat. Then with the same despairing gesture of defiance with which he had turned from the altar, he began to creep cautiously, silently up the angled stairs.

And Kenton, waiting again until he was but a shadow in the shining mists, followed.

Chapter Thirty

THE TEMPEST HAD STRUCK. KENTON, CLIMBING, HEARD THUNderings like the clashing of armied shields; clanging of countless cymbals; *tintamarre* of millions of gongs of brass. Ever louder grew the clangor as he ascended; with it mingled now the diapason of mighty winds, staccato of cataracts of rain.

The stairway climbed the sheer wall of the buttress as a vine a tower. It was not wide—three men might march abreast up it; no more. Up it went, dizzily. Five sharp angled flights of forty steps, four lesser angled flights of fifteen steps, he trod before he reached its top. Guarding the outer edge was only a thick rope of twisted gold supported by pillars five feet apart.

So high was it that when Kenton neared its end and looked down he saw Bel's House only as a place of golden mists—as though he looked from some high mountain ledge upon a valley whose cloudy coverlet had just been touched by rays of morning sun.

The clinging stairway's last step was a slab some ten feet long and six wide. Upon it a doorway opened—a narrow arched

portal barely wide enough for two men to pass within it side by side. The doorway looked out, over the little platform, into the misty space of the inner temple. The hidden chamber into which it led rested upon the head of the gigantic buttress.

What a place to guard, thought Kenton. One man might hold that stair end against hundreds!

The doorway was closed by a single fold of golden curtains as heavy and metallic as those which had covered the portal of the Moon God's Silver House. Involuntarily he shrank back from parting them—remembering what the parting of those argent hangings had revealed to him. He mastered that fear; drew a corner of them aside.

He looked into a quadrangular chamber, perhaps thirty feet square, filled with the dancing peacock plumes of the lightnings. He knew it for his goal—Bel's place of pleasance where his love waited, fettered by dream. He glimpsed the priest crouched against the further wall, rapt upon a white veiled woman standing, arms stretched wide, beside a deep window close to the chamber's right hand corner. The window was closed by one wide, clear crystal pane on which the rain beat and the wind lashed. With thousands of brushes dipped in little irised flame the lightnings limned the loves of Bel broidered on hangings on the walls.

In the chamber were a table and two stools of gold; a massive, ivoried wooden couch. Beside the couch was a wide bellied brazier and a censer shaped like a great hour glass. From the brazier arose a tall yellow flame. Upon the table were small cakes, saffron colored, in plates of yellow amber and golden flagons filled with wine. Around the walls were twenty little lamps and under each lamp a ewer filled with fragrant oil for their filling.

Kenton waited, motionless. Danger was gathering below him like a storm cloud with Klaneth stirring it in wizard's caldron. Perforce he waited, knowing that he must fathom this dream

of Sharane's—must measure the fantasy in which she moved, mind asleep before he could awaken her. The blue priest had so told him.

To him came her voice, sweet and dreaming:

"Who has seen the beatings of his wings? Who has heard the tramplings of his feet like the sound of many chariots setting forth for battle? What woman has looked into the brightness of his eyes?"

There was a searing flash, a clashing of thunder—within the chamber itself it seemed. When his own sight had cleared he saw Sharane, hands over eyes, groping from the window.

And in front of the window stood a shape, looming gigantic against the flickering radiance, and helmed and bucklered all in blazing gold—a godlike shape!

Bel-Merodach himself who had leaped there from his steeds of storm and still streaming with his lightnings!

So Kenton for one awed instant thought—then knew that shape to be the Priest of Bel in the stolen garments of his god!

The white figure, that was Sharane, slowly drew hands from eyes; slowly let them fall, eyes upon that shining form. Half she dropped to her knees, then raised herself proudly; she searched the partly hidden face with her wide, green dreaming eyes.

"Bel!" she whispered, and again: "Lord Bel!"

The priest spoke: "O beautiful one—for whom await you?"

She answered: "For whom but thee, Lord of the Lightnings!"

"But why await you—me?" the priest asked, nor took step toward her. Kenton, poised to leap and strike, drew back at the question. What was in the mind of the Priest of Bel that he thus temporized?

Sharane spoke, perplexed, half-shamed:

"This is thy house, Bel. Should there not be a woman here to await thee? I—I am a king's daughter. And I have long awaited thee!"

The priest said: "You are fair!" His eyes burned upon her—"Yes—many men must have found you fair. Yet *I*—am a god!"

"I was fairest among the princesses of Babylon. Who but the fairest should wait for thee in thy house? I am fairest of all—" So Sharane, all tranced passion.

When again the priest spoke, his bitterness made Kenton once more wonder what it was within his mind that forced him to these questionings—held him back from that possession of Sharane for which he had defied his god.

"Princess, how has it been with these men who thought you fair? Say—did not your beauty slay them like swift, sweet poison?"

"Have I thought of men?" she asked, tremulously.

He answered, sternly: "Yet many men must have thought of you—king's daughter. And poison, be it swift and sweet, must still bear pain. I am—a god! Yet I know that!"

There was a silence; abruptly he asked: "How have you awaited me?"

She said: "I have kept the lamps filled with oil; I have prepared cakes for thee and set out the wine. I have been handmaiden to thee."

The priest said: "Many women have done all this—for men, king's daughter—*I* am a god!"

She murmured: "I am most beautiful. The princes and the kings have desired me. See—O Great One!"

The irised lightnings caressed the silver wonder of her body, hardly hidden in the nets of her red gold hair unbound and fallen free. The priest leaped from the window. Kenton, mad with jealousy that another should behold that white beauty, darted through the curtains to strike him down. Halfway he stopped short, understanding, even pity for the Priest of Bel holding him back.

For the priest's soul stood forth naked before his inner sight—

and that soul was even as his own would have been, he knew, had he been priest and the priest been Kenton.

"No!" cried Bel's priest, and tore the golden helm of his god from his head, hurled sword away, ripped off buckler and cloak— "No! Not one kiss for Bel! Not one heartbeat for Bel! What—shall I pander for Bel? No! It is the man you shall kiss —I! It is a man's heart that shall beat against yours—mine! I—I! No god shall have you!"

He caught her in his arms, set burning lips to hers.

Kenton was upon him.

He thrust an arm under the priest's chin; bent back the head until the neck cracked. The priest's eyes glared up into his; his hands left Sharane and battered up at Kenton's face; he twisted to break the latter's grip. Then his body became limp; awe and terror visibly swept away his blind rage. For now the priest's consciousness had taken in Kenton's face—saw it as his own!

His own face looking down upon him and promising him—death!

The god he had defied, betrayed—had struck! Kenton read his thoughts as accurately as though they had been spoken. He shifted grip, half lifted, half swung the priest high above the floor and hurled him against a wall. He struck; crashed down; lay there twitching.

Sharane crouched—veils caught up, held fast to her by rigid hands—on the edge of the ivoried couch. She stared at him, piteously; her wide eyes clung to his, bewildered; deep within her he sensed grapple of awakening will against the webs of dream. One great throb of love and pity for her pulsed through him; in it no passion; to him at that moment she was no more than child, bewildered, forsaken, piteous.

"Sharane!" he whispered, and took her in his arms. "Sharane — Beloved! It is I—Jonkenton! Beloved—awaken!"

He kissed her on the cold lips, the frightened eyes.

"Jonkenton!" she murmured. "Jonkenton!"—and then so low he could barely hear— "Ah—yes—I remember—Jonkenton! He was lord of me—ages—ages ago!"

"Wake, Sharane!" cried Kenton, and again his lips met and clung to hers. And now her lips warmed and clung to his!

"Jonkenton!" she whispered. "Dear lord—of me!" She drew back, thrust into his arms fingers that clutched like ten slow closing fingers of steel; in her eyes he saw the dream breaking as break the last storm clouds before the sun; in her eyes the dream lightened and darkened; lightened—became but cloudy, racing wisps.

"Beloved!" cried Sharane, and all awake, freed from all dream, threw arms around his neck, pressed lips all alive to his: "Beloved one! Jonkenton!"

"Sharane! Sharane!" he whispered, the veils of her hair covering him as she drew his face to her cheeks, her throat, her breast.

"Oh, where have you been, Jonkenton?" she sobbed. "What have they done to me, Jonkenton? And where is the ship—and where have they taken me? Yet—what does it matter since you are with me!"

"Sharane! Sharane! Beloved!" was all he could say, over and over again, his mouth on hers.

Hands gripped his throat, strong hands, shutting off his breath. Choking, he glared up into the mad eyes of the Priest of Bel—even as the priest had glared into his when it had been Kenton's hands at his throat. Broken, Kenton had thought him —and broken he had not been! He had recovered, crept up behind him!

"Got me!" groaned Kenton to himself. "Got me! Hell—why didn't I kill him! Got me? Not—now!"

He threw right leg behind the priest's; hurled himself back against the priest with all his strength. The priest fell, dragging

Kenton with him. His hands relaxed just enough to let Kenton thrust one of his own between the strangling fingers and his throat. Then he twisted, broke the grip, lay with legs locked in the priest's, pinning him down. Like a snake the priest slid from under him, threw him aside, sprang to his feet. Quick as he, Kenton leaped up. Before he could draw sword the Priest of Bel was upon him again, one arm around him prisoning his right arm, the other with elbow fending off Kenton's left and tearing at his throat.

Far below, through the drumming of the blood in his ears, Kenton heard one faint throb of another drum, awakening, summoning, menacing—as though it had been a beat of the *zig-gurat's* own heart, alarmed and angry!

And far below Gigi, swinging with long apelike arms from the grapnel he has cast over the outer stairway's edge, hears it, too; swarms with frantic speed up the rope, and with the same tremendous speed follow him first Zubran and close behind him the Viking.

"Alarm!" mutters Sigurd, and draws them under the protection of the skirting wall that they may hear him. "Pray Thor that the sentinels have not heard! Swift now!"

Hugging the wall, the three climb up and around the silver terrace of Sin, the Moon God. The lightnings have almost ceased, but the rain sweeps down in stinging sheets and the winds roar, rocking the temple; the stairway is rushing torrent half knee deep. Blackness of the great storm shrouds them.

Breasting wind and rain, stemming the torrent, they climb—the three.

About Bel's high bower reeled Kenton and the priest, locked tight in each other's arms, each struggling to break the other's

hold; then throttle, tear, slay. Around them circled Sharane, the priest's stolen sword in hand, panting, seeking opening to strike; finding none, so close were the two locked, so swiftly did back of priest, back of lover, swirl before her.

"Shalamu! Shalamu!" The dancer of Bel stood at the golden curtains—whipped up through the secret shrines by love, remorse, despair! White-faced, trembling, she clung to those curtains.

"Shalamu!" shrilled the dancer. "They come for you! The Priest of Nergal leads."

The priest's back was toward her, Kenton facing her. The priest's head was bent forward, straining to sink teeth in his neck, tear out the arteries; deaf, blind to all but the lust to kill, his ears were closed to Narada.

And Narada, seeing Kenton's face in the fitful light of the brazier, thought it that of the man she loved!

Before Sharane could move she had sped across the room.

She drove her dagger to the hilt in the back of the Priest of Bel!

Huddled for shelter in an alcove cut for them in the *ziggurat's* wall, the sentinels of the silver zone feel arms thrust out of the storm. Two fall with necks snapped by Gigi's talons, two fall under swift thrust of Sigurd's sword, two drop beneath the scimitar of the Persian. In that niche now lie only six dead men.

"Swift! Swift!" Sigurd leads the way past the silver zone; they round the orange zone of Shamash the Sun God.

Three deaths reach out of the void, and the sentinels of the orange zone lie dead behind the hurrying feet of the three.

They sense a deeper darkness at their left—the black walls of the zone of Nergal, God of the Dead—

"Swift! Swift!"

The Priest of Bel slid from Kenton's opening arms; he dropped to his knees; he fell backward, dying eyes staring into those of the dancer.

"Narada!" he gasped, through bloody froth. "Narada—you —" The froth turned to a red stream.

The Priest of Bel was dead.

One look the dancer gave him, gave Kenton one scorching look and knew—what she had done!

"Shalamu!" she wailed—and wailing still flew at Kenton, dagger poised to strike. Before he could draw sword, before he could raise hands to beat her off, even before he could fall back, she was upon him. Down swept the blade, straight for his heart. He felt the bite of its point—

The point swerved, ripped down through the skin over his ribs. In that same instant Sharane had sprung, had caught the dancer's hand, had wrested the dagger from it and driven it deep into Narada's breast.

Like a young tree at the ax's last blow the dancer stood for a heartbeat, shuddering, then down she dropped, prone upon the priest. She moaned and with the last flare of life flung arms around his head, laid lips to his.

Dead lips now on lips of the dead!

They stared at each other—Sharane with red blade in hand and Kenton with red runes on chest written by that blade—they stared down at the Priest of Bel and at Bel's dancer; there was pity in Kenton's eyes; there was no pity in Sharane's.

"She would have killed you!" she whispered, and again: "She would have killed you!"

A blinding flash filled the chamber; fast on its heels chaotic shatterings. The lightnings had begun afresh. Kenton ran to the doorway; parted the curtains; listened. Below him the House of Bel seemed to lie tranquil in its misty aureate glow. He heard nothing—and yet, had there been sound could he have heard

it in the tumult of the thunderings? He saw nothing, heard nothing—and yet—

He sensed that danger was close; torment and death stealing up to them; perhaps even now creeping up the zigzags of those steps whose base was hidden. Torment and death for Sharane and for him—creeping, stealing, ever closer.

He ran back to the window. Gigi—Sigurd—Zubran! Where were they? Had they failed to make the outer stairway? Had they, too, been caught? Or were they marching up to him, cutting their way through the sentries? Were close?

Could they not meet them—Sharane and he?

The window was deep. Three feet of masonry stretched between the inner sill and the yard wide, single pane that closed it. He drew himself in; saw that the pane was thick, transparent crystal held by a circle of metal. It was kept shut by levers thrust into niches within the casement of stone. One by one he lifted the levers. Suddenly the window flew open; he was half pushed, half washed back into the chamber by the wind and rain volleying through. He battled forward against them; looked down over the outer sill—

The steps of the great stairway were full forty feet below him!

Between the window and the steps fell an almost perpendicular wall, streaming with storm, impossible to descend, equally as impossible to be scaled. He peered on each side and above him. The bower of Bel was a huge cube set on the top of the conical temple. The window through which he peered was close to the edge of a side of this cube. Not more than a yard from his right hand was a corner of that cube; for twenty feet to his left its black wall stretched; its top was twenty feet above him.

He felt Sharane beside him; knew that she was trying to tell him something; could not hear her in the shrieking of the tempest.

Set within the breast of a lightning flare the sentinels of Nergal see three silhouettes of doom spring out of the blackness. Swords bite among them. One shrieks and tries to flee. His cry is torn to tatters by the roaring gale; he is caught by long arms, long talons snap his neck; he goes whirling with the wind over the stairway's wall.

Now the red zone's sentries are dead within their niche.

Now the three pass by the blue zone of Nabu, the God of Wisdom, and find no guards to challenge them; nor are there sentries before Ishtar's white house; and none outside the golden zone of Bel.

And here the curving stairway abruptly ends!

Now they take counsel there, the three, scanning the smooth masonry rising above them without break. A wail that not even the tempest can still shudders past them—the heartbroken, mad wailing of Bel's dancer as she hurls herself on Kenton.

"That cry came from there!" Thus Sigurd, pointing outward where the window of Bel's bower, hidden to them, faces the lightnings. And now they see that the wall of the great stairway merges into the side of the topping structure close to its corner. But the wall's slope is such that none may stand upon it to peer round that corner; nor can one standing on the highest step see round that corner's edge.

"Use for your long arms, Gigi," grunts the Viking. "Stand close as you can to stair wall end. Here! Grip me by knees and thrust me outward. My back is strong and I can twist round that corner."

Gigi takes him by the knees, lifts him; throws one muscle gnarled dwarf leg over the wall for balance; thrusts Sigurd out with mighty arms.

And Sigurd, held against the side by the wind like a leaf, looks straight into the face of Kenton little more than a foot from him!

"Wait there!" howls the Viking, and signals Gigi with kick of foot to draw him back.

"The wolf!" he tells them. "There—in a window so close he can draw me through to him! Lift me again, Gigi. When I kick —let me go! Then let Zubran follow by the same road. Stay you here, Gigi—for without you to draw us back there will be no return. Stay where you are with arms outstretched, ready to bear in to you whatever you touch. Quick now!"

Again he is swung outward; his wrists are caught in Kenton's grip. Gigi loosens him. For an instant he swings in space and then is drawn up to the sill and over.

"Zubran comes!" he shouts to Kenton, and runs to the doorway where Sharane stands, sword in hand.

And now the Persian, held by Gigi's long arms, swings round the bower's edge, is caught by Kenton; stands beside him.

Fanned by the gale rushing through the open window the brazier flamed like a torch; the heavy golden curtains were bellying; the little lights along the wall all blown out. The Persian leaned back, found the levers and snapped enough of them down to hold the window shut. He gave Kenton's hand one swift clasp; looked curiously at the bodies of priest and dancer.

"Gigi!" cried Kenton. "Is he safe there? Did none follow you?"

"None," answered the Persian, grimly. "Or if they did—their hands are too shadowy to hold swords, wolf. Gigi is safe enough. He waits to swing us to him as we crawl from the window—all except one of us," he added, under his breath.

Kenton, thoughts on Gigi, the way to freedom, did not hear that last odd phrase. He leaped to the door on one side of which stood watchful Sharane, on the other tense Sigurd. He drew her to him in fierce caress; loosed her and peered through the curtains. Far below him were dull gleamings, reflection from ar-

mored caps and coats of mail, glints of swords. A quarter of the way up the angled stair that led from Bel's House to his bower; they were—soldiers, moving slowly, cautiously, silently; creeping to surprise, as they thought, Bel's priest in dreaming Sharane's arms!

There was time, minutes still, for him to put in action the plan swift born within his brain. He set the golden helm of Bel on his head, fastened buckler, threw the scarlet threaded mantle over his shoulders.

"Sigurd!" he whispered— "Zubran! Those who come must believe that here are only Sharane and—that man who lies there. Else before we could pass the middle terrace they will have given the alarm, soldiers will be pouring up the outer stairway and—we are done! Therefore when those below are close upon the door Sharane and I will leap out on them with swords. They will not try to slay us—only capture us. They will be confused—fall back. Then take Sharane swiftly and pass her out to Gigi. We will follow—"

A swift glance had passed between the Persian and Sigurd, laden with meaning.

"The first part of the plan is good, wolf," interrupted the Persian, smoothly. "But not the last. Nay—one must remain here until the others are safely away from the temple. Else, when they have entered here, quickly will the black priest's wit tell him what has happened. And there will be a ring around the place through which a regiment could not break. Nay—one must remain; stay behind for—a time, wolf!"

"*I* will stay," said Kenton.

"Beloved!" whispered Sharane. "You go with me—or I go not at all!"

"Sharane—" began Kenton.

"Dear lord of mine—" she stayed him, serenely. "Do you

think that ever again I will let you go from me—be parted from you? Never! In life or death—never!"

"Nay, wolf—I stay," said the Persian. "Why, listen! Sharane will not go without you. So that bars you—since go she must. Gigi cannot well remain—since he cannot get here to remain. That you will admit? Good! And Sigurd must go to show us the road back, since none but him knows it. Who is left? Zubran! The gods have spoken. Their argument is unanswerable."

"But how will you get away? How find us?" groaned Kenton. "You say yourself that without Gigi's help you cannot swing from the window!"

"No," answered Zubran. "But I can make me a rope out of these bed coverings and the hangings. I can slip down that rope to the steps I glimpsed beneath me. And one may escape where five could not. I remember the road through the city and that road we took when we came out of the trees. Wait you there for me."

"They are very close, Jonkenton!" called Sharane, softly.

Kenton ran to the doorway. A dozen steps below crept the soldiers, a score of them, treading noiselessly two by two, small shields ready, swords in hands; behind them a little knot of priests, yellow robed and black robed and among the black robes—Klaneth.

Crouched against the wall at Sharane's right was Sigurd, hidden but set for swift guarding of her. The Persian dropped at Kenton's right, pressed close to the wall where those who came forward might not see him.

"Cover the brazier," whispered Kenton. "Put it out. Best have no light behind us."

The Persian took it, but he did not touch the cover that would have killed the fires within. Instead, he shook it, covered the flame with embers, set it in a corner where the faint glow of the coals could be seen.

The feet of the first pair of soldiers were almost on the top step, their hands reached out to draw aside the coverings of the narrow door.

"Now!" breathed Kenton to Sharane; took fleet, proud note of her fearlessness. He tore the curtains down. They stood, she in her white robes of priestess, he in the golden panoply of the god, confronting the soldiers. And they, paralyzed by that unexpected apparition, halted like automatons, gaped at the twain.

Before they could recover from surprise Sharane's blade flashed, Kenton's sword struck like bolt of thin blue lightning. Down went the two leaders. Ere the man he had slain could fall, Kenton had snatched the shield from his arm, passed it to Sharane; slashed down again at the warriors behind.

"For Ishtar!" he heard Sharane cry—and saw her sword bite deep.

"The woman! The priest! Take them!" came the roar of Klaneth.

Down bent Kenton, raised a fallen soldier in his arms and hurled him straight into the pack. The body flailed them—as though alive! Down they went before it—rolling, cursing, down the flight they fell, soldiers and priests. Some there were who crashed into the slender railing, tore gaps in it, dropped and plunged like plummets through the mists to be broken on the floor of Bel's House so far below.

Back Kenton leaped; caught Sharane in his arms, pressed lips brutally, possessingly on hers; tossed her to Sigurd.

"To the window!" he bade. "Give her to Gigi!"

He darted before them; opened the pane. Far away now the lightnings glimmered; blackness had given way to darkest twilight; the rain still hissed in sheets driven by the howling wind. In that dark twilight he saw the dripping arms of Gigi stretched out round the bower's corner. He dropped back. The

Viking slid past him, Sharane in his grip. For an instant she hung in air; she was caught by Gigi. She was drawn from sight.

There came a shouting from the inner stairway. The soldiers had rallied; were rushing up. Kenton saw Sigurd and the Persian lifting the heavy couch, throwing off its coverings, tilting it. They rocked it to the doorway, shoved it through, sent it crashing down the steps. Came another shouting, cries of agony, groaning. The bed had swept the men before it as a well hurled ball does the wooden pins. It had swept and crushed them—had swung across the stairway at turn of the highest lesser angled ledge and had jammed there against the golden roped rail—a barricade.

"Go, Sigurd," cried Kenton. "Wait for us by the woods. I fight here with Zubran."

The Persian looked at him, a light of affection such as Kenton had never before seen there softening the agate eyes. He nodded to Sigurd. As though it had been a signal prearranged, the Viking's arms were instantly around Kenton. Strong as he had grown he could not break their grip. And Zubran whisked the golden helm of Bel from his head and set it on his own; tore loose the golden buckler, dropped his own coat of mail and fastened it in its place; took the scarlet threaded mantle of the god and wrapped it half round his mouth, hiding his beard. Then Kenton was carried like a struggling child to the window by the Viking; was thrust out of it; was caught by Gigi and dropped beside the weeping Sharane.

The Viking turned and folded the Persian in his arms.

"No waiting, Northman! No sentiment now!" Zubran snapped, breaking away. "There can be no escape for me—you know that, Sigurd. The rope? Words—to satisfy the wolf. I love him. The rope? Why, they would slide down it behind me like snakes. Am I a trembling hare to lead the hounds to the hiding places of my kind? Not I! Now go, Sigurd—and when you have

gotten clear of the city tell them. And quickly as you can make for the ship."

Said the Viking, solemn: "Shield maidens are close! Odin takes the hero, no matter what his race! You sup with Odin All-Father in Valhalla soon, Persian!"

"May he have better cooked dishes then than I have ever tasted," laughed the Persian. "Out of the window, Norseman!"

And Zubran holding his knees, the Viking crawled out, was caught by Gigi. Then down the terraces, Sigurd leading, Sharane covered by Gigi's great cloak, Kenton cursing still, flew the four of them.

The Persian did not close the window after them; let the wind stream through. He swaggered back through Bel's bower.

"By all the Daevas!" swore Zubran, "never have I known such feeling of freedom as now! Lo—I am all alone—the last man in the world! None can help me, none can counsel me, none weary me! Life is simple at last—all there is to it is for me to slay until I am slain. By Ormuzd—how my spirit stands on tip-toe—"

He peered around the doorway.

"Never has that couch given men such trouble to mount!" he chuckled as he watched the soldiers below working to clear away the barrier. Turning, he piled in a heap the silken clothes torn from the bed; he ripped down wall hangings and with them built the pile higher. One by one he took the lamps and emptied them on the pyre; the oil in the ewers beneath them he poured upon it.

"That old world of mine," mused the Persian as he worked, "how it wearied me! And if the wolf's tale be true, the world that replaced it would weary me even more. And this world has well wearied me—by the Flame of Sacrifice, but it has!"

He stooped, picked up the body of the Priest of Bel, carried it to the window.

"It will puzzle the black priest more to find you without than to find you here," he grinned, and slid him out.

He walked and stood over the dancer.

"So beautiful!" whispered the Persian, and touched her lips, her breast. "I wonder how you died—and why? It must have been amusing—that! I had no time to ask the wolf. Well—you shall sleep with me. And perhaps, when we both awaken—if we do—you shall tell me!"

He laid the body of the dancer on the oil-soaked pile. He took the smoking brazier and placed it close beside her.

There came a roaring from below; a trampling of feet on the steps. Up streamed the soldiers, stronger now by scores. An instant the Persian showed himself, mantle held before his face.

"The priest! The priest!" they cried—and Klaneth's voice over all—

"Slay him!"

The Persian stepped back to the cover of the wall, smiling. He picked up the shield Sharane had dropped. Through the narrow doorway a soldier leaped, a second close on his heels. The scimitar hissed twice, struck twice—swift as swiftest snake. The stricken men fell under the feet of those pressing on from behind, tripping them, confusing them. And now up and down, parrying, thrusting, slashing, flew the Persian's keen edge until its red bath dyed his arm to shoulder.

"They should be off the outer wall by now and well away," mused Zubran. He flexed the weary muscles of his arm; peered out at the soldiers clustered on the landing below in angry argument with the priests; and stretching down from that knot as far as he could see, the steps glittered with other warriors, packed close.

They mustered; they rushed up the steps like a great serpent; they pushed through the door, clambering over the pile of the

dead. The red drip of the scimitar became a steady running rivulet—

An agony bit deep into his side, above the hip. A falling swordsman had raised himself on knees, thrust blade upward. And the Persian knew his wound was mortal! He cut down at the grinning face, leaped upon the dead, cleared the doorway with rain of stroke. He leaped back, seized the table. Holding it before him he sprang upon the dead, thrust it like a battering ram into the faces of those rising behind them. Again they rolled back, encumbered by their own numbers; pitched off the railless edge and hurtled down through the mists, clutching at empty air.

For twenty steps the stairway was clear.

An arrow whistled. It cut through the twisted mantle around his neck; pierced him where gorget and helm met. He felt the blood pouring down his throat choking him.

The Persian staggered to the silken pile on which lay Narada. He caught a leg of the brazier and overturned its coals upon the oil soaked cloths.

Thin flames arose.

Giddiness took him; he dropped to his knees. On his knees he crawled up the pile, its flames roaring now in the wind blast from the window. He crawled up through those fires, fell beside the body of the dancer.

"A clean death!" smiled the Persian. "At the last—like all men—I go back to the—gods of my fathers! A clean death! O Fire Immortal—take me!"

As though in answer to that prayer a high and fragrant flame shot up beside him. It shot up, hovered, then bent over the Persian. The tip of the flame broadened. It became a cup of fire filled with a wine of flames!

And into that flaming cup the Persian dipped his face; drank

of its wine of fire; breathed in its fire as though it had been incense!

His head fell back, unmarred; the dead face smiling. His head dropped upon the soft breast of the dancer.

The flames made a canopy over them; they licked them with their little, clean, red tongues; ate them with their clean, crimson teeth!

Chapter Thirty-One

NOW THE FOUR FOR WHOSE FREEDOM THE PERSIAN HAD DIED were far away. Safely they had passed the terraces; the dead sentries lay as they had fallen. None had been sent to relieve them, none had found them—but the four heard a humming begin inside the *ziggurat* like that of a disturbed and colossal hive. Heard the great drum begin its throbbing and sped faster under cover of the balustrade of stone down to where the grapnel of Gigi hung. One by one they slipped down its rope and into the sheltering trees. The tempest scourged them—but it shielded them. None were on the wide street to challenge their going. Emakhtila lay within its painted houses hiding from the storm.

When the cup of flame had dipped to the Persian's lips they were well along that other way upon which opened the hidden path back to the ship.

When the soldiers had at last mustered courage to swarm the stairs once more, and with the black priest on their heels had poured within the silent bower, they were far beyond the clustered houses, stumbling through the deep mud of the farm side,

the Viking at lead, Sharane carried in Gigi's arms, Kenton guarding the rear—and watching, ever watching, for the Persian.

And back in that chamber where the Persian's ashes lay mixed with the dancer's, the black priest stood, mazed and with something of fear touching his wicked heart, looking upon those ashes—until his wandering gaze caught gleam of the butterflies in Narada's veils that had slipped from her when the Persian had lifted her, caught, too, the trail of blood that led to the open window and had flowed from the body of the priest of Bel as the Persian had carried him there. And staring out that window the black priest saw in the livid dusk the crumpled body of Bel's priest—dead, white face raised to his own, forty feet below.

The priest! Then whose were the charred bodies on the pyre? Sharane's and Narada's? If not—who had been the man fighting in golden helm and buckler, face hidden in the god's mantle? So swift had been the sword play, so much had that man been hidden by the soldiers, so much by cover of the wall that the black priest watching from below had caught few glimpses of him; had taken it for granted that it was Bel's priest. But had it been?

Back ran the black priest; kicked savagely at the ashes of the pyre and what still lay among them. Something clanged upon the floor—a broken scimitar! He knew that hilt—Zubran, the Persian's!

Something glittered at his feet—a buckle, gems undulled by their bath of fire! He knew that, too—the buckle of Narada's girdle!

Why then—these blackened forms were the Persian—the dancer!

Sharane had been freed! But how—how!

The black priest stood rigid, eyes flaming, face so dreadful that the soldiers shrank back from him, threw themselves against the walls, out of his way.

Then he plunged howling out of Bel's bower, down the an-

gled stairway, through the secret shrines, on and on until he had reached that cell where he had left Kenton with the six archers. Howling, he threw open the door, saw archers and officer still deep in sleep and Kenton—gone!

And shrieking curses, rage and baffled cruelty racking him with tortures as fiery as those he had promised Kenton and Sharane, the black priest staggered out of that cell, roaring for men to go forth and search the city for the temple drab and the slave; offering all he owned for them—all, all! If only they brought the pair back to him alive!

Alive!

But now the four had left the road and had halted in that wood where the hidden path began and where the Persian, in his craft, had bade them wait for him. And here Sigurd told them of Zubran's sacrifice and why that sacrifice had to be. While Sharane wept and Kenton's throat ached with sorrow, Gigi's beady black eyes grew soft and his tears ran down the furrows of his wrinkles.

"What's done—is done," said Sigurd. "He sups, by now, with Odin and the heroes!" Brusquely he shouldered by them and took the way. Silently they followed. And for a little, in his grief, Kenton hated his love, walking now before him, since through her he had been dragged from the side of this friend who had given up his life that Kenton might have his love!

But hated her not for long. Again he saw her fighting beside him; knew that as gladly as he would she would have stayed within that chamber; gone unshrinkingly to death beside him and the Persian had she but known—and had he desired it. He strode beside her; took her in remorseful arms. She clung to him—

On they went and on, along the hidden way. The rain drenched them, the wind beat them. When storm lightened they went swiftly; when it darkened so that the Viking could no

longer see the trail, they halted. On and on—beating back to the ship.

Now Sharane faltered and fell, nor could she rise again; and the three, clustering round her, saw that her thin sandals were in rags and that her slim feet were bare and bleeding and that for long each step must have been an agony. So Kenton took her in his arms and carried her, and when he tired Gigi took her; and Gigi was untiring.

And at last they came to where the ship lay hid. They hailed her and found the warrior maids on watch. To them they gave Sharane and they carried their mistress into her cabin and ministered to her. The slaves were awake beneath the awning spread to shield them from the rain, and the overseer reported that he had seen nothing, heard nothing but the tempest.

Now arose discussion as to whether they should stay hid until that tempest had abated. At last they decided that they would not; that it was better to push out to sea than stay so close to Emakhtila and Nergal's haunted place. So the chains were unshackled from the trees, the ship drawn out of shelter, her bow warped round and pointed to harbor's mouth.

Then up came the hook; down dipped the oars. Slowly the ship gathered speed. She swung out round the point of rocks and, Sigurd at the steering oar, shot into the eye of the wind, breasted the roaring combers and leaped like a racer out into the open ocean.

Kenton, utterly spent, dropped where he stood. To him came Gigi, lifted and carried him into the black cabin.

Long squatted Gigi beside him, wide awake, though weary as he was, peering here and there with bright eyes; listening, watchful. For it seemed to Gigi that the black cabin was not as it had been when they had left it; it seemed to him that it had become darker, that shadows of shadows moved fitfully about the walls,

cowered in the corners; and it seemed to Gigi that he heard a whispering, ghosts of whispers, coming and going.

And now Kenton moaned and muttered in his deep sleep, gasped as though hands sought his throat. Gigi, pressing paw on Kenton's heart, stilled him.

But after a time the watchful eyes of Gigi dulled, their lids dropped, his head nodded.

In the empty niche where the idol of Nergal had stood above the bloodstone slab of worship a darkness gathered, a cloudy shape of curdled shadows.

The shape darkened. Within it began to form the semblance of a face, a face that brooded upon the sleeping pair, hate filled, menacing and gloating—

Again Kenton groaned and fought for breath against nightmare terror. And Gigi threshed out long arms, leaped to his feet, glared about him—

Swiftly as it had come, before Gigi's sleep-heavy eyes could open, the shadowy face had vanished—the niche was empty.

Chapter Thirty-Two

WHEN KENTON AWAKENED, IT WAS THE VIKING AND NOT GIGI who lay beside him, stripped and snoring. He must have slept long, for the drenched garments the Ninevite had taken off him were dry. He put on clout and tunic, slipped feet in sandals, threw over his shoulders a short cloak and softly opened the door. Blackness and dark twilight had given way to a pallid dusk that turned the sea a sullen gray. The rain had ceased, but all the world of the ship vibrated to the steady roar of a mighty wind pouring over it.

Before that wind the ship was flying, riding like a gull on the crests of giant waves; slipping back, as the swells passed, through smoothly onrushing floors of water like liquid slate; rising to fly again upon the crest of the next racing wave.

He struggled up to the steersman's place, the spindrift stinging his face like sleet. To one of the rudder oars clung Gigi, at the other were two slaves from the rowers' pit. The Ninevite grinned at him; pointed to the compass. He looked and saw that the needle which held constant to Sorcerers' Isle pointed straight astern.

"Far behind us now is that den!" shouted Gigi.

"Go below!" cried Kenton in a pointed ear, and would have taken the oar from him. But Gigi only laughed, shook his head and pointed toward the cabin of Sharane.

"That is your course," he roared. "Steer it!"

And buffeting the gale Kenton came to the door of the rosy cabin; opened it. Sharane lay asleep, cheek cradled in one slim hand, tresses covering her like a silken net of red gold. Two maids, watchful, crouched at her bedside.

As though he had called to her, she opened sleepy eyes—sleepy eyes that as she looked at him grew sweetly languorous.

"My own dear lord!" whispered Sharane.

She sat up, motioned the girls to go. And when they had gone she held out white arms to him. His own arms were around her. Like a homing bird she nestled in them; raised red lips to his.

"Dear lord of me!" whispered Sharane.

He heard no more the roaring wind—heard nothing but the whisperings, the sighings of Sharane; forgot all worlds save that which lay within Sharane's tender arms.

Long they flew on the tempest's wings. Twice Kenton took Gigi's place at the rudder oars, twice the Viking relieved him before the great wind died and they sailed once more on dimpling, sparkling turquoise sea with a perfumed breeze beating the sail with gentle hands.

Began now for those upon the ship a hunted life—and a haunted one.

Far, far behind them must lie Emakhtila by now, and yet—On all the four rested clear certainty of pursuit. No fear, no terror—but untroubled knowledge that the ship was a hunted thing; knowledge that unless they could outwit, outsail the fleet they knew must be combing these strange seas until they found

a safe and secret harbor, there could be but one end for them. Nor did one of them believe, deep in his heart, that there was such sanctuary.

Yet they were happy. Full tide of life beat round Kenton and Sharane. They took their fill of life and love. And Sigurd sang old sagas, and a new one he had made of Zubran the Persian, while he and Gigi beat out huge shields and arrows for the bows. The shields they set around the bulwarks at the ship's bow and pierced them with slits through which arrows could be winged. Two they fastened on each side of the stern to guard the helmsman.

"If we are slain, dear lord, we shall be slain together," Sharane would say. And always:

"Always together—from now henceforth, beloved," Kenton would answer her.

And Sigurd would chant of battle to come, and shield maidens who would hover over the ship ready to bear the soul of Sigurd, Trygg's son, to his seat in Valhalla where Zubran awaited him and Gigi. He sang of place for Kenton there, too—but not when Sharane was in earshot, since in Valhalla was no place for women.

Hunted and—haunted!

Within the black cabin the shadows thickened and faded, grew stronger, passed and returned. Something of the dark lord of the dead was there, had retaken seizin of his deck. Nor Gigi nor the Viking cared to sleep there now; they sought the open deck or the cabin of the warrior maids. And the slaves murmured of shadows that flitted over the black deck and clustered at the rail and stared down upon them.

Once, while Sigurd drowsed over the tiller bar, he awakened to find that unaware to all the course of the ship had changed, that the greater needle of the compass pointed straight over the bow to—Emakhtila; that the ship was moving under the oars back to Sorcerers' Isle!

Thereafter they steered two by two—Kenton and Sharane, Gigi and the Viking.

Nor was there power within Sharane to banish the shadows.

"I will make my bed within the black cabin," she had said. "Once I was vase for Ishtar—and it may be that something of her still lingers within me to cleanse that den again."

But whatever evil it was gathering there seemed only to grow stronger; banishing sleep from her or making that sleep dreadful. So Kenton forbade her.

One isle they made and replenished food and water. There was good harbor there, a hidden cove and beyond a great forest beckoned them. Here they stopped for a time; talked of drawing the ship up shore, concealing her; then finding place within the woods to build fort; meet there whatever attack might come.

The ship drew them back to her.

Restless were they all, uneasy on the land; each afraid in secret heart that the other three would make up minds to stay; and gay as children they were when the ship drove out again and dipped her bow to the crested waves while the clean sea wind shouted to them and the isle dropped behind.

"A prison," laughed Kenton.

"No life, that!" growled Sigurd. "Hiding in a burrow till the dogs come to dig us out! Now we can see what comes."

They met a long ship, a *unireme* like their own, but of twenty oars. It was a merchant carrier and heavily laden, and it would have fled from them. But the Viking cried that she must not escape to carry tidings to Emakhtila. So they pursued and rammed and sunk her with the chained slaves wailing at the oars —Kenton and Gigi and Sigurd ruthlessly, Sharane white faced and weeping.

They met another—a light vessel no larger than the ship, but this time a war boat, a hunter. They feigned to flee and it gave chase. And when it was close to them the Viking swerved and fell

astern; then drove the ship swiftly against the other's side, shearing the oars. Those on that vessel fought bravely; yet, hampered by the black priest's command to take but not slay, they were no match for Gigi's great mace, the Viking's blade and Kenton's sword of blue lightnings. They fell before them and the arrow storm from Sharane and her maids. But they took toll before they were ended. One of the warrior maids died with an arrow through her heart and both Gigi and Sigurd had their wounds.

In this craft they found store of metal for the Viking's forge. Better still, balls of tow and oils to soak them in and flint to light them, strong shafts to carry the balls when blazing and oddly shaped cross-bows to hurl the shafts with their heads of fire. All these and the metal they took. Then sank that vessel with its living and its dead.

On sailed the ship and on; while Sigurd hammered out his long shields and Gigi and Kenton set the cross-bows in place by rosy cabin and dark, with tow and oils and flint ready for the firing.

And time passed; nor did the tides of life that flowed strong through Kenton of the ship wane ever; waned not—grew stronger and more strong for him and for Sharane.

And then—

Lying beside his sleeping love Kenton awoke—or thought that he awakened—and opening his eyes saw not the cabin but two faces gazing down upon him from some unknown space; vast faces, vague and nebulous. Their shadowy eyes dwelt upon him.

One spoke—and lo, it was the voice that had guided him through the temple's secret shrines! The voice of Nabu!

"Again Nergal centers his wrath upon the ship, O Ishtar!" it said. "The strife between him and your Sister-Self once more will trouble gods and men, deepening the shadows in a myriad worlds. Great Mother—only you may end it!"

"My word went forth"—the other voice was like the wind

rippling over thousands of harp strings—"my word went forth; and that Sister-Self of mine whom of old men have called the Wrathful Ishtar—has she not her rights? She has not conquered Nergal. Nor has Nergal conquered her. There has been no settlement such as I decreed. How, then, can my Sister-Self rest when the word I spoke in anger has not yet been resolved? And as long as she contends, so long must Nergal also who, too, is bound by that word."

"Yet the flames you kindled within the souls of Zarpanit and Alusar, the flames that were the life of those souls—they did not perish," the still voice whispered. "Did they not escape both your Wrathful Sister and Dark Nergal? And why, Ishtar? Was it not because you willed it so? Did you not hide them? What of that word of yours then?"

"Wise are you, Nabu!" There was a touch of anger in the ripple of the harp strings— "Now let this man whose eyes we have opened see what that sin my priestess and her lover wreaked of ill when it brought into each other's arms the Mother of Life and the Lord of Death! Let this man judge whether my anger were just or not!"

"Let him judge!" echoed the voice of Nabu.

The vast faces faded. Kenton looked out upon depth upon depth, infinity upon infinity of space. Myriads of suns were hived therein and around them spun myriads upon myriads of worlds. Throughout that limitless space two powers moved; mingled yet ever separate. One was a radiance that fructified, that gave birth and life and joy of life; the other was a darkness that destroyed, that drew ever from the radiance that which it had created; stilling them, hiding them in its blackness. Within the radiance was a shape of ineffable light and Kenton knew that this was the soul of it. In the darkness brooded a deeper shadow, and he knew full well that this was its darker soul.

Before him arose the shapes of a man and a woman; and

something whispered to him that the woman's name was Zarpanit and the man's Alusar, the priestess of Ishtar and the priest of Nergal. He saw that in each of their hearts burned a wondrous, clear white flame. He saw the two flames waver, bend toward each other. And as they did so, shining threads of light streamed out from the radiance, linking the priestess with its spirit; while from the black core of the darkness threads of shadow ran out and coiled about the priest.

And as the bending flames touched suddenly the shining threads and shadow threads were joined—for an instant were merged!

And in that instant all space shuddered, the suns rocked, the worlds reeled and all the rushing tides of life paused! Sprang in the wake of that shuddering births monstrous and evil, pestilences and wars, harvests of sorrows!

"Behold the sin!" rippled the voice of harp strings.

"Open his eyes wider!" came the still, cold voice.

And now Kenton looked into a radiant chamber in which sat as in judgment dread powers, veiled in glories of light—all save one who hid in darkness. Before them stood the priest and priestess and at the side of the priestess—Sharane! He knew he looked upon the gods within the temple of ancient Uruk—upon the gods as they judged between Ishtar and Nergal and doomed Ishtar's priestess and the dark lord's priest.

Again he saw the white flames within the hearts of those two —untroubled, serene. Indifferent to gods or angry goddess! Bending toward each other, unquenchable, immutable, indifferent of wrath of gods or their punishments! Immortal!

That picture wavered, faded. Now upon the floor of that radiant chamber he saw priest and priestess, Sharane and Klaneth and around them the bodies of many women and men. There was a high altar half hidden by a cloud of sparkling azure mist.

Within the mist, upon that altar, that had been built by unseen hands, a wondrous ship was growing.

And ever as that ship grew Kenton saw, far beyond it as though it were its shadow cast into another dimension, another ship growing; a ship that seemed to build itself out of a turquoise sea in a world of silver clouds! Step by step that shadow ship followed the building of the puppet ship upon the altar.

He knew that the shadow was the real—the toy being shaped upon the altar was but the symbol!

Knew, too, that symbol and reality were one; things linked by an ancient wisdom; things created by ancient powers, of which the fate and fortune of one must be the fate and fortune of the other!

Duoform! One a puppet and one real! And each the same!

Now the unseen hands within the mists of azure had finished the ship. They reached down and touched, one by one, the bodies of Ishtar's priestess and Nergal's priest, Sharane and Klaneth and all who lay around them. And as they touched, those still forms vanished. The unseen hands lifted and placed, one by one, puppets on the puppet ship.

Upon the decks of the shadow ship on the turquoise sea in the world of silver clouds bodies lay—one by one they gathered there as the toys were set in place upon the toy ship on the altar!

At last there were no more still forms upon the floor of the council chamber of the gods.

The ship was made and manned!

A ray shot out from the radiance that veiled Ishtar and touched the ship's bow. A tendril of darkness uncoiled from the blackness in which brooded the Lord of the Dead and this darkness touched the ship's stern.

That picture wavered and fled. There appeared another chamber; small, almost a crypt. In it stood a single altar. Over the altar hung a lamp nimbused by an aureole of azure; and the

altar was of lapis lazuli and turquoise and studded with sapphires of clearest blue. And Kenton knew that this was some secret shrine of Nabu, Lord of Wisdom.

On the altar rested the ship. As Kenton looked upon it it was borne to him again that this jeweled toy, this gleaming symbol, was linked inseparably with that other ship sailing in another space, another dimension; sailing on strange seas in an unknown world—

The ship that he was on!

And that as the toy fared, so fared the ship; and as the ship fared, so fared the toy; each threatened when one was threatened; sharing each the other's fate.

That picture faded. He looked upon a walled city out of which towered a high temple, a terraced temple, a *ziggurat*. A host besieged the city; its walls were covered with its warriors. He knew that the city was ancient Uruk and the high temple that in which the ship had been built. And as he looked, the besiegers broke through the walls; overwhelmed the defenders. He had a glimpse of red carnage—that picture fled.

Again he saw the crypt of Nabu. There were two priests there now. The ship rested upon the floor on a lattice of silvery metal. Over the altar hovered a little shining blue cloud. It came to him that the two priests were obeying a voice in that cloud; saving the ship and those who sailed on it from the invaders. They poured over it from huge basins a fine mortar that was like powder of ivory flecked with dust of pearls. It covered and hid the shining ship. Where ship had been was now a block of stone. The cloud vanished. Other priests entered; dragged the block out, through corridors and into the court of the temple. There they left it.

Into the court swarmed the victors, looting and slaying. But ever, unheeding, they passed the rough block by. The block that held—the ship!

Now he looked upon another walled city, great and beautiful. He knew it for Babylon in the full moon of its power. Another *ziggurat* took its place. That melted and Kenton looked upon another secret shrine of Nabu within it. The little blue cloud rested again upon the altar. The block lay beside it and blue robed priests worked on it, smoothing, polishing, cutting on a glistening surface the arrow headed cuneiform.

The warning of Nabu, God of Wisdom!

Flickered thereafter before him fleeting pictures of battles and of triumphs; pageant and disaster; quick, broken scenes of temple and city lost and won and lost once more; destroyed only to be built again in greater grandeur—

Then fallen—abandoned by the gods.

Then crumbling—abandoned by man; the desert creeping on it; at the last covering it.

Then—forgotten!

But always, no matter what the passing fate of the city, he saw the block in which lay the ship endure; untouched by fire, shielded from destruction, passed by pillagers, ignored by conquerors.

There came a whirlpool of images, gray and indistinct in the swiftness of their passing. They steadied. He saw men working in the sands that were Babylon's shroud. He recognized among them—Forsyth! He saw the block unearthed; borne away by tall Arabs; saw it crated into a primitive cart drawn by patient little rough coated ponies; watched it tossing in the hold of a ship that sailed a sea he knew; watched it carried into his own house—

He looked upon himself as he freed the ship!

He looked again into the shadowy eyes.

"Judge!" sighed the harp strings.

"Not yet!" whispered the still voice.

Kenton looked again into that immeasurable space wherein

he had first seen radiant power and dark. But now he saw within it countless flames like those which had burned in breasts of Ishtar's priestess and the Lord of Death's priest; saw infinity flecked and flaming with them. They burned deep down through the shadows, and by their light up from the darkness came groping multitude upon multitude of other flames that had been shrouded by the darkness. He saw that without those flames the radiance of itself would be but a darkness!

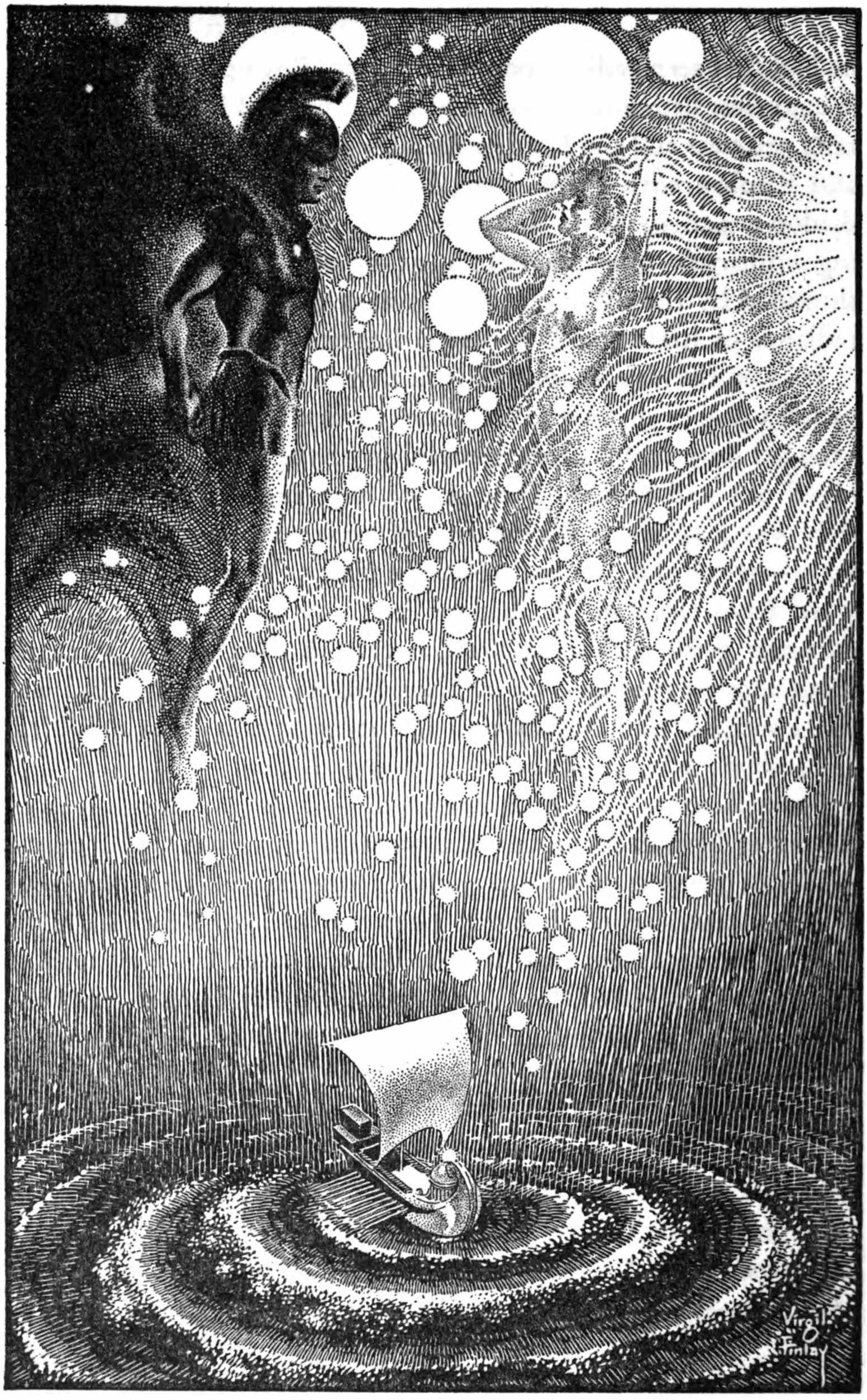
He saw the ship as though it floated in that same space. As he gazed a deeper shadow flitted from the soul of the blackness and brooded over it. Instantly something of the soul of the radiance rayed out and met it. They strove, one against the other. The ship was a focus of hatred and of wrath from which, visibly, waves swung out in ever widening circles. As they circled outward from the ship the shadow lines that ran from the core of darkness grew darker, thicker, as though they sucked strength from those waves. But under their beat the radiance dulled and the countless flames flickered and swayed and were troubled.

"Judge!" whispered the cold tones of Nabu.

Now Kenton in this dream of his—if dream it was—faced dilemma; hesitated. No trivial matter was it to indict this power—Ishtar, goddess or whatever that power might be in this alien world where, certainly, it was powerful indeed. Besides, had he not prayed to Ishtar and had she not answered his prayer? Yes, but he had prayed to Nabu, too, and Nabu was Lord of Truth—

He made up his mind; and his thoughts shaped themselves into words of his own tongue, his familiar idioms.

"If I were a god," he said, simply enough, "and had made things with life, things with lives to live, men and women or whatever they might be, I would not make them imperfect, so that they must, perforce, through their imperfections, break my laws. Not if I were all powerful and all wise, as I have gathered gods—and goddesses—are supposed to be. Unless, of course,


Virgil
Finlay

I had made them only for toys, to play with. And if I found that I had made them imperfect and that therefore they did wrong, I would think that it was I who was responsible for their sinning —since being all powerful and all wise I *could* have made them perfect but did not. And if I *had* made them for my toys I surely would not heap upon them heart-break and misery, pain and sorrow—no punishments, O Ishtar—not if they were toys that could feel these things. For what would they be but puppets dancing through their day as I had fashioned them to do?

"Of course," said Kenton naïvely, and with no ironic intention, "I am no god—and most certainly could not be a goddess —nor until I came into this world have I had any conscious experience with either. Yet, speaking as a man, even if I *had* punished any one who had broken my laws I would not let my anger run on and hurt any number of people who had nothing whatever to do with the original cause of my anger. Yet that, if what I have just beheld was true, is what this battle that is about to be waged for the ship seems to bring about.

"No," said Kenton, very earnestly, and quite forgetting the vague faces hovering over him. "I can't see any justice in the torment of that priest and priestess; and if the struggle for the ship does the damage it appeared to, I certainly would stop it if I could. For one thing I would be afraid that shadow might get too thick some time and put all the little flames out. And for another—if I had spoken a word in anger that made all that misery I wouldn't let that word be stronger than myself. I wouldn't as a man. And if I were a god or a goddess—very certainly, indeed, I would not!"

There was a silence; then—

"The man has judged!" whispered the still voice.

"He has judged!" The vast ripple of the harp strings was almost as cold as that other. "I will recall my word! Let the strife end!"

The two faces vanished. He raised his head and saw around him the familiar walls of the rosy cabin. Had it been all a dream? Not all—those scenes he had beheld had been too clear cut, too consecutive, too convincing. Deep within him he knew that none of it had been dream!

Beside him Sharane stirred, turned his face to hers.

"What were you dreaming, Jonkenton?" she asked. "You were murmuring and muttering—strange words that I could not understand."

He bent and kissed her.

"I greatly fear, heart of mine, that I have offended that goddess of yours," he said.

"Oh—Jonkenton—but no! How!" Sharane's eyes were terrified.

"By telling her the truth," answered Kenton; then unveiled to Sharane all of that vision.

"I forgot she is—a woman!" he ended, a bit ruefully.

"Oh—but beloved, she is *all* women!" cried Sharane.

"Well—that makes it all the worse then!" laughed Kenton, reckless. He leaped up; whistling gayly, threw cloak about him and went out to talk to Gigi.

But Sharane did not join in his laughter; sat thinking, long after he had gone, with troubled eyes; at last walked to the empty shrine; threw herself before it, prostrate; praying.

THE SHIP IS FREED

Chapter Thirty-Three

"WHAT BEGAN ON THE SHIP MUST END ON THE SHIP!" SAID Gigi, nodding bald head wisely when Kenton had told him also of that vision of the two faces. "Nor do I think we shall have long to wait before we see that end."

"And after?" asked Kenton.

"Who knows?" Gigi shrugged broad shoulders. "No rest for us, wolf, while Klaneth lives. Nay—I think I know what this darkening of shadows on black deck means. By those shadows Klaneth watches us—they tell him where we are—or so it comes to me. They are the thread by which he follows us. Also my skin is sensitive, wolf, and it tells me the black priest is not so far away. When he comes—well, we conquer him or he conquers us, that is all. Also, I do not think that you can count on any help from Ishtar. Remember that in your vision she promised only that the strife of the Wrathful One and the Dark One should end. She made no promises, I gather, as to Sharane or you—or the rest of us."

"That will be well," said Kenton cheerfully. "As long as I

am given chance to stand fairly, face to face, with that swine bred from hell swill I am content."

"But I think you gathered that she was not mightily pleased with what you had to say to her," grinned Gigi, slyly.

"That is no reason for her punishing Sharane," answered Kenton, harking back to his old thought.

"How else would she punish you?" asked Gigi, maliciously—then suddenly grew serious, all impishness gone. "Nay, wolf," he said and laid paw on Kenton's shoulder; "there is little chance for us. And yet—if all your vision were true, and the little flames you saw were real—what matters it?

"Only," said Gigi, wistfully, "when those flames that were you and Sharane journey forth into that space and another flame comes to you that once was Gigi of Nineveh—will you let it journey with you?"

"Gigi!" There were tears in Kenton's eyes. "Wherever we go in this place or any other, no matter what may happen—you go with us as long as you will."

"Good—wolf!" muttered Gigi, arms round him—

There came a shout from Sigurd at the rudder; he pointed over ship's bow. To Sharane's door they sped and with her through the cabin of the maids and out beneath the sickled prow. The inverted semisphere of silvery mists that were the sky had expanded; the smooth blue sea stretched to a horizon far distant. Across that horizon ran a far flung line of towers and minarets, turrets and spires and steeples, skyscrapers and mosques; a huge *chevaux-de-frise*. From where they stood the outlines of this bristling barrier seemed too regular, too smoothly shaped, to be other than the work of man.

Was it another city—the refuge they had sought? A place where they might stay, safe from Klaneth and his pack until they could sally forth to meet that pack and its master on more equal terms?

Yet if a city—what giants were they who had reared it?

The oars dipped faster; the ship sped; closer came the barrier—

It was no city! Up from the depths of the turquoise sea thrust thousands of rocks. Rocks blue and yellow, rocks striped crimson and virid malachite; rocks all glowing ochre and rocks steeped in the scarlet of autumn sunsets; a polychrome Venice of a lost people of stone, sculptured by stone Titans. Here a slender minaret arose two hundred feet in air yet hardly more than ten in thickness; here a pyramid as great as Cheops', its four sides as accurately faced—by thousands, far as eye could reach the rocks arose in fantasies of multi-colored cone and peak, *aiguille* and minaret and obelisk, *campanile* and tower.

Straight up from the depths they lifted, and between them the sea flowed in a maze of channels both narrow and broad; in some of the channels smoothly, in others with swift eddies and whirlpools and racing torrents; and in others the sea lay like a placid pool.

There came another shout from the Viking, urgent, summoning—and with it the clangor of his sword beating upon his shield. Back they darted—to him—

Down upon the ship and little more than a mile away rushed a long line of other ships, a score or more of them both single and double banked—boats of war racing on oars that dipped and rose with swiftness of sword blade stroke. Between them and the ship a lean and black *bireme* leaping the waves like a wolf.

The pack of Klaneth with the black priest in the lead!

The pack, breaking out of the mists unseen by Sigurd, eyes like the others fast upon that colossal fantasy of stone that seemed to be the end of this strange world!

"In among the rocks!" cried Kenton— "Quick!"

"A trap!" said Sigurd.

"A trap for them as well as us then," answered Kenton. "At the least, they cannot ring us there with their boats."

"The only chance!" grunted Gigi.

The slaves bent their backs; through a wide channel between two painted monolithic minarets flew the ship. Behind them they heard a shouting, a baying as of hungry hounds in sight of the deer. Now they were within the maze and the rowers must go slowly and the Viking's rudder craft was needed indeed, for the currents swung them, gripping at bow and stern and the sheer rocks menaced. Twisting, turning, on and on they went until the painted rocks closed from the sight of the open sea. Yet now, too, Klaneth and his pack were in the maze. They heard the creak of the oars, the commands of the helmsmen, searching for them, ferreting them out.

Abruptly as though snapped out, light vanished and darkness fell! It blotted out the channel they were following, blotted out the towering rocks. From the pursuing boats came horn blasts, orders shrill with fear, outcries.

A purplish glow sprang up within the blackness. Dimly by it the four could see the outlines of the ship, their own tense faces.

"Nergal!" whispered Sharane. "Nergal comes! Off the black deck while we can!"

She gripped Kenton's hand, moved to the steps leading from rudder post to deck; Viking and Gigi behind them. Slowly they went; for the shadows seemed to cling to them, to coil themselves round feet and knees, hold them back! They passed through the clutching shadows as through undertow of nightmare. But not yet were the shadows strong enough to hold them. They passed black deck; stood panting, spent, upon the space before the cabin of Sharane.

Now the whole of black deck was blotted out again as though an inky cloud had leaped upon it.

And now from every quarter of the horizon whirled pillars of darkness. Their feet were in the sullen sea, their heads lost in the pall that spread above. Ahead of them drove a charnel odor, the breath of death.

"Nergal in all his might!" shuddered Sharane's voice.

"But Ishtar—Ishtar promised the strife should end!" groaned Kenton.

"But she did not say how it would end!" wailed Sharane. "And, O Beloved—Ishtar comes no more to me—and all my power is gone!"

"Ishtar! Ishtar!" she cried—and caught Kenton in her arms. "Mother—my life for this man's! My soul for his! Mother Ishtar—!"

The van of the whirling pillars was close; the circle between them and the ship swiftly narrowing. Before they could roll over the ship and on the echo of Sharane's cry a blinding light, pearl white and pearl rose flashed down upon them—on Sharane, the three men and the three warrior maids crouched white faced at Sharane's feet.

High over their heads, thrice the height of the mast, a great globe of moon fire hung poised, effulgent, serene, and brighter, far brighter than a score of moons at full. From its periphery, enclosing the whole fore part of the ship as in a tent of light, poured rays; a radiance that ringed them and in whose center they stood as though prisoned in a hollow cone whose top was the moon globe. Around that radiant tent the pillared darknesses churned, pressing for entrance; finding none.

Faint at first and far away began a keen edged shrieking; louder it grew as though from racing hordes of screaming fiends fresh loosed from Abaddon. The purple darkness lightened, turned to a lurid violet. It was pricked by countless points of crimson fire.

And now the myriads of fiery points were at the ship; strik-

ing like little snakes of fire at globe and sides of radiant tent, shooting at them like arrow heads of fire, thrusting like little lance tips of fire!

Came the whir and rustle of thousands of wings. Around calm globe and cone of light whirled the doves of Ishtar in thousands! And as the points of fire struck and stabbed the doves darted to meet them. Like little living shields of shining silver they caught the thrusts of the fiery javelins upon their breasts!

Where were the doves coming from? Cloud upon cloud of them poured from above the embattled moon orb, yet for each whose ashes were whirled away a score rushed in to meet the striking fires, and all the air was palpitant with the tumult of their wings. And as each dove fell, blackened and blasted, the fire that had slain died with it!

The hellish shrieking raised itself a full octave. The inky cloud that had leaped upon the black deck shot up, towering, gigantic, into the heavens. The countless points of fire rushed together, coalesced. They became a crimson scimitar of fire that struck and struck down upon shining orb and ship!

Before the first stroke could fall the phalanxes of the doves had wheeled; had formed themselves into a shield mighty enough to have been held and wielded by Ishtar's own arm!

Ever as the scimitar of fire slashed and thrust at the radiant globe and ship, the shield of the doves met it. Fiery point and fiery edge struck and blackened the living argent—but could not pierce. And ever the seared wounds of that shield shimmered moon white, as soft, untouched silver breasts darted in and healed them!

The scimitar was dimming! No longer were its fires so crimson bright!

The moon orb pulsed; its radiance flamed wide, dazzlingly, blindingly, hurling back the darknesses.

Swiftly as it had come, it vanished! With it went the doves!

Kenton saw the gigantic scimitar pause, quiver uncertainly —as though the dread hand that held it had been stilled with sudden doubt—then down it swept once more.

In mid-sweep another sword met it, a sword of brilliant light —the light of those flames he had seen in his vision and that were the life of that radiance that fructified the swarms of worlds!

Their light? Why, it was forged of those flames! It was a sword of those flames!

It met the scimitar—and the blade of the Lord of Death was shattered!

He heard a voice—the voice of Ishtar—

"I have beaten you, O Nergal! Your fires are no match for my flames!"

And Nergal, snarling—

"A trick, Ishtar! Not with you, but with your Sister-Self was my warfare to be!"

And again Ishtar—

"No trick, Nergal! I never said that I would not fight you. The strife is ended. Yet this I will grant—though *you* have lost the ship—*I* will not take it! The ship is free!"

Then Nergal, grudgingly, snarling still—

"The strife is ended! The ship is free!"

For one beat in time Kenton seemed to see a vast vague face gazing down upon the ship, a face in which were all the tendernesses of all mothers, all loving women beneath the sun—the shadowy eyes dwelt softly on Sharane, softly but enigmatically upon him—

The face was gone!

As when a shutter is dropped before a closed lamp, so the darkness had fallen; and abruptly as when the shutter is lifted so the darkness fled; light took its place.

The ship lay in a wide channel; around it the phantasmagoria of the sea floored city of stone. At port a thicket of obelisks all

dull greens and glaring vermillions raised tops on high. Three arrow flights on starboard a painted monolith arose, pyramidal, its pointed tip hundreds of feet in air.

Around an edge of it crept the black *bireme* of Klaneth!

Chapter Thirty-Four

SIGHT OF THAT LEAN BOAT THAT LIKE A LANK HOUND NOW came leaping at them was like wine to Kenton; like strong wine to all.

Heavy upon them had hung the dread conflict just passed—they but midges, dancing helplessly now in the fierce radiance of life's spirit, now stilling as helplessly in the blackness of life's negation. The charnel odor was still in Kenton's nostrils; the chill of the grave on his heart; the touch of the worm upon his eyes.

But there—there on the black priest's ship—were things he knew! Sword edge and biting arrow point; death—it might be, but death with the pulses beating like war drums; hot death striking in as the red tides of life rushed out; things understandable; reality.

Reaction swept them all. He heard the clarion of Sharane's voice trumpeting golden defiance, the roar of Gigi, the shouting of Sigurd. And he was shouting, too—challenging the black priest, daring him, taunting him, menacing him.

Silently the lean ship drove on them.

"Sigurd, to the helm!" Sanity returned to Kenton. "Make for a narrow channel. One we can row but one that will force them to draw in their upper bank of oars. Thus shall we equal their speed—at the least!"

The Viking ran back to the tiller. The whistle of the overseer shrilled in the rowers' pit; the ship leaped forward. It swept round the obelisks, the *bireme* now only two arrow flights behind, and into a wide lake of blue water bordered by a hundred magenta domes set on huge cubes of damask; the turquoise tides ran between the mathematically spaced sides of the cubes in a hundred canals, each barely wide enough for the oars of the ship to dip without touching the stone.

"In there! Take any channel!" shouted Kenton. The ship heeled, darted to the closest opening. A flight of arrows from the *bireme* whistled into their wake—five ship lengths short!

The huge blocks with their mosqued tops bordered the narrow canal into which they had passed; for a full mile the open way stretched, straight ahead of them. A third through and they heard the *bireme's* sweeps clanking, saw it come swinging on a single bank of oars into the entrance. Quicker, at Kenton's command, dipped the ship's blades; heavier than the ship, the *bireme* fell behind.

And as they flew through the blue water Kenton and Sharane took swift counsel with Gigi and the Viking back at the stern.

"Ravens gather!" chanted the Viking, eyes brightening with fey battle fires. "Shield maidens ride from Valhalla! I hear the feet of their horses!"

"They may return empty handed!" exclaimed Kenton. "Nay, Sigurd—now we have our only chance. None but the black priest has yet smelled us out. Let us pick our place and give battle to him."

"We are but seven, and there are many times seven on that

bireme, wolf," said Gigi, doubtful it seemed—although his little eyes sparkled.

"I run no longer from the black swine!" cried Kenton, hotly. "I am weary of dodging and skulking, Gigi. I say let us play the game out now! What does your thought tell you, Sharane?" he asked.

"My thought is as yours," she answered him, tranquilly. "As you will it, so is my will, beloved!"

"What do you say, Norseman?" asked Gigi. "Quick now—decide!"

"I am with the wolf," replied Sigurd. "No time better than now. In the old days when I was a dragon master there was a trick we played when we were chased by a stranger. Have you seen the dog when the cat turns on him—ho! ho!" laughed the Viking. "Swift flies the cat until it has reached a corner. And there it lurks until dog yelps past. Then out springs cat upon it, digging deep its claws, striking at eyes, raking dog's sides. Ho! Ho!" roared Sigurd. "Swift we would fly like the cat until we had found a place to turn and skulk. Then as other dragon sped by, out we would spring upon it; like the dog, loud would it howl while we clung and tore! Ho—let us find such a corner where we may lurk till this hell dog of black priest leaps past. Then we shall spring. Give me two of the maids to guard me here as I steer. You three with the other maid, stand by the cross-bows, and when I shear their oars loose the fire shafts upon them."

"In the meantime," asked Gigi, face wrinkling, "what about their own arrows?"

"We must take our luck as it comes," said Kenton. "Gigi, I am one with Sigurd—unless you have a better plan to offer."

"No," answered Gigi—"No—I have none, wolf"—he lifted his great body, shook long arms on high. "By the Hollow Hells and Ischak their Keeper," roared Gigi, "I, too, am weary of run-

ning away! I ran away from my princess because of my bald head—and what luck did it bring me? By Nazzur the Eater of Hearts— Nay, by Zubran"—his voice softened—"who gave his life for us—I run no more! Pick your place, wolf—you and the Norseman—and let us fight!"

He waddled away; then turned.

"The end of the channel draws close," he said. "Sharane, between hearts of you and your maids and arrow points are only soft breasts and a fold of cloth. Don coats of mail like ours and caps and buskins and greaves for your knees. I go to put on another linked shirt and get me my mace."

He dropped down the steps; Kenton nodded, and after Gigi trooped Sharane and her three women to doff their robes and kirtles, don battle garb.

"And after you have shorn their oars—if you do?" asked Kenton of the Viking, lingering.

"Then we return and ram," said Sigurd. "So we did in the old days. The ship is lighter than black priest's galley and far more quickly can she turn. When we ram, be all of you at bow ready to beat off any who try to drop aboard. After the galley is both shorn and rammed we can tear at it as we will—like the cat."

The end of the canal was near; half a mile behind the *bireme* clung to the ship's wake. Out of her cabin came Sharane and her three maids, four slender warriors in coats of mail, hair hidden under brown linked caps, leathern buskins on legs and greaves at knees. They piled arrows on stern and bow; with Gigi seeing to it that cross-bows were in order, tow and oil and flints ready.

The ship swept out of the canal; hung on reversed oars while Kenton and the Viking took survey. At left and right, in two great arcs, ran high walls of unbroken crimson rock. Smooth and precipitous, continuing they would make a circle a mile or more in diameter—but whether they did so continue Kenton could not see. Out of the waters they walled, in its center if they

encircled it, a huge pinnacle lifted, its needle point thrice the height of the walls, shutting off the further view. Its pedestal was one colossal block, octohedral, shaped like a star. Out from it rayed the star points, long and narrow like titanic wedges, their ends fifty feet high and edged like knife.

"We go to the left," said Sigurd. "Let the black dog know which way we turn."

Kenton leaped to the cabin's top; waved derisive arms; heard shouting.

"Good!" rumbled Sigurd. "Now let them come. For here, wolf, we make our stand! Look"—he pointed as the ship drove past the first star point—"between tip of stone and wall there is little more than room for ship and galley to pass each other. Also the stone is high and hides us when we have passed. Yes, it is the place! Yet not here beyond the first star tip shall we lurk—Klaneth may expect that and come by it slowly and alert; nor beyond the second—for again he may come slowly though surely not so slowly as before. But not finding us there he will believe that we have but one thought—and that to escape. So he will pass the third tip at speed to close in on us. And it is there that we shall leap out upon him!"

"Good!" said Kenton, and dropped down to the deck; stood beside Sharane and Gigi; told them the Viking's plan. And Gigi grunted approval and walked away to test once more the cross-bows. But Sharane locked mailed arms round Kenton's neck and drew his face close to hers and drank him with wistful eyes that seemed as though they could not drink enough.

"Is it the end, beloved?" she whispered.

"There shall be no end—for us, O heart of mine," he answered.

They stood so, silent, thinking many things, while the second star point wheeled by. And now the third leveled its tip at them and Sigurd cried out to raise oars, and when the ship had swum a

hundred yards or so, brought her sharply around. He called to him the overseer, made plain the plan.

"We strike at the *bireme's* left banks of oars," he said. "No wish have I to run risk of spitting the ship on that edge of rock. When I shout, draw in your left sweeps. When we have sheered and passed, whip the slaves again into full speed. When we have rammed, reverse oars and pull free. Is it clear?"

The black's eyes glistened; he bared white teeth; ran back to the pit.

Now from beyond the great stone wedge came faint rasp of sweeps, the splashings of oars. Two of the warrior women sped back to Sigurd, crouched beside him, arrows ready at slits of the high shields. A tenseness gripped the ship.

"One kiss, Jonkenton," whispered Sharane, eyes now misty. Their lips clung.

Nearer came the oar sounds, closer, closer—faster—speeding—

A low whistle from the Viking, and the rowers of the ship bent backs under sting of whip. A dozen strong strokes and the ship leaped like a dolphin straight for the star tip. Past tip it shot; heeled as the Viking vigorously threw rudder sharp to starboard.

Ten ship lengths ahead of them was the *bireme*, racing on its four-fold multiple feet of oars like an enormous water spider. And as the ship flashed out and at it a roar arose from its crowded decks, a shouting confused and clamorous, medley of wild commands—and filling all that clamor, bewilderment and stark amaze. The oars of the *bireme* faltered; stopped at mid-stroke; held rigid, just touching sea.

"Faster!" howled Sigurd, and as the pit's whip cracked, drove with a twist of the rudder the ship down parallel to the course of the galley.

"In oars!" he howled again—

The scimitar prow of the ship struck the *bireme's* sweeps. It swept through them like a blade through brittle stubble. Broken, splintered, the long shafts fell, holding back the rush of the ship as little as though they had been straws. But in the galley those who gripped the great handles fell back with ribs crushed, backs snapped, as the heavy stocks were flung against them.

Up from the ship's side as it passed, up into the ranks staring down on it, ranks turned wooden with surprise of that unexpected attack, hissed the fire balls from the cross-bows. Hissing like serpents of fire, expanding as the air fanned them, the fire balls struck—hurling back the soldiers, searing them, flaming up as they fell on deck and into open hold and touching with fingers of inextinguishable flame all that would burn.

Again the galley roared—and now with touch of terror in its voice.

The ship was clear; down thrust the withdrawn oars of it; straight ahead she flew into the wider space beyond star tip of stone and circling wall. Swift once more the Viking turned her. Back raced the ship upon the *bireme*.

And the *bireme* swung helplessly, sidled grotesquely like a huge spider from one of whose sides all legs have been cut, slithered like that same spider toward the knife edged tip of the stone star ray. From hold and deck little columns of smoke swirled.

Now Sigurd realized all that galley's peril; saw that it was close to piercing stone ray; saw that he might drive it upon that ray, send stone blade biting into it; destroy it.

"Guard bow!" shouted Sigurd.

He threw back the rudder, made wider turn, hurtled upon the galley not at stern as he had planned but far toward mid-ship. The ram struck and bit deep; ship's prow too. Under the impact

Kenton and the others toppled over and before they could set foot on bow fell prone on faces, clutching at deck.

Beneath the blow the *bireme* reeled, heeled until the seas sucked over its farther side. Down dipped its starboard oars seeking to thrust back from the menacing stone. The sweeps churned, but under the weight of the ship clinging to its flank, its bow turned sharply in. It struck the knife edge of the rock. There was a crackling as that rock bit through the hull.

"Ho!" roared the Viking. "Drown, you rats!"

Down upon the ship whistled an arrow cloud. The shafts shrilled over Kenton staggering to his feet. They pierced deck and pit. Before the rowers could back sweeps, pull free, they dropped, hung limp over oars, bristling with quivering bolts.

On the ship's bow fell a dozen grapples, holding it fast to the wrecked galley. Ropes whirled from the galley, and sliding down them came the swordsmen.

"Back! Back to me!" shouted Sigurd.

The *bireme* shuddered; its gashed bow slid down the rock edge for a dozen feet or more, the water pouring over its fore deck. Up from the sea bobbed heads of soldiers, washed away and swimming for the ship. On the deck of the galley a milling began as those on it fought to drop upon the ship.

"Back!" cried Kenton. He caught Sharane's arm; they ran with heads bent low as from the steersman's place the arrows of the Viking and his flanking maids winged into the mass of men swarming over the rosy cabin.

The galley slipped again along the cleaving edge of stone; checked fall with bow half under water, yet held by the ship's ram. But that last slipping had wrenched sharply down the ship's own prisoned bow. As the deck tilted Kenton fell, dragging Sharane with him. He caught swift glimpse of men dropping from the *bireme's* side, throwing themselves into the sea, striking for the ship.

He scrambled to his feet as the soldiers at the bow rushed. And now Gigi sprang past him, twirling his great mace. Kenton leaped to his side, Sharane at his heels.

"Back! Back to Sigurd!" grunted the Ninevite, club sweeping the soldiers before it like a flail among wheat.

"Too late!" cried Sharane.

Too late! Men were swarming up the stern chains, clambering up from the sea, tearing away the shields, flowing up from the black deck.

From the *bireme* came a howling, frenzied, beastlike. At its sound even the soldiers halted, Gigi's mace hung in air. Then upon the ship leaped—the black priest!

Pale eyes pools of hell fire, mouth an open square from which hell's own blackest hate flew screaming, he hurled himself through the swordsmen, dived under Gigi's falling mace and flung himself on Kenton.

While before he could turn to help, the swordsmen were on Gigi, stabbing, cutting, darting in and out as the great mace rose and fell, tearing at him as wolves tear at a moose at bay.

But Kenton was ready. Out flashed the blue blade and met the thrust of the black priest's sword. Yet quicker than he, that sword swept back, bit with a paralyzing agony into that old wound in his side!

Kenton staggered, hilt half dropping from his hand.

Howling now in triumph Klaneth swept down the death blow. Before it could fall Sharane had thrown herself between Kenton and priest, had parried the stroke with her own sword—

The left hand of the black priest shot out, dagger in its grip—buried that dagger in Sharane's breast!

Now all the world was but one red flame before Kenton —one red flame in which was nothing but Klaneth's hellish face. Ere the black priest could move, swifter than the lightning stroke, Kenton had struck. The blue sword bit down, shearing

away half the black priest's face, leaving in place of cheek and chin, eye and ear, only a red smear! Bit on down into his bull neck and half through his shoulder. The black priest's sword clanged upon the deck. He stood for an instant, the one eye glaring—terror, agony dulling the hell flame in it.

The sword of Kenton bit again—straight through the black priest's neck.

And still with that one eye glaring hideously, the head of Klaneth leaped from his huge shoulders, struck the rail and whirled into the sea. For another instant the gross hulk of the body stood, the neck spouting. Then crashed.

No further heed paid Kenton to him nor to the *bireme's* men. He bent over his love, raised her in tender arms.

"Sharane! Sharane!" he called, and kissed the pale lips, the closed eyes. "Beloved! Come back to me!"

The eyes opened, the slim hands made effort to lift, to caress—

"Follow me, beloved!" whispered Sharane. Her head dropped upon his breast.

And now Kenton, standing there with his dead love in his arms, looked about the ship. All around him were what were left of the galley's crew, fierce faces staring at him; but silent, making no move.

"Sigurd!" he called, and sought the Viking with his gaze. On the helmsman's deck was a great heap of slain and under them—the Viking!

"Gigi!" he whispered—

There was no Gigi! Where Gigi had wielded his giant flail the dead were thick—and under them, as under the dead that were the Viking's shroud, lay Gigi!

"Sharane! Gigi! Sigurd!" Kenton sobbed—"Gone! All gone!"

The ship lurched; shuddered. He took a step forward, Sharane clutched to his breast. A bow twanged, an arrow caught him in his side.

He did not care—let them kill him—Sharane was gone—and Gigi—

Why was it that he could no longer feel Sharane's loved body in his arms! Where had the staring soldiers gone! Where was—the ship!

There was nothing around him but darkness—darkness and a roaring tempest sweeping toward him out of farthest space!

And through that darkness, seeking in it as he fled for sight of Sharane, reaching out faltering hands for touch of her, whirled Kenton—

And swaying, sobbing with weakness and with heart-break, opened eyes to look again upon his old room.

THE BROKEN TOY!

Chapter Thirty-Five

FOR A LITTLE TIME HE STOOD, HALF IN STUPOR, SEEING less the room than swift, fleeting pictures of that last battle. His gaze caught at last the long mirror; held there. With a faint stirring of curiosity he looked at the white, pain-drawn face staring from it, the haggard, sorrow-filled eyes. So that—was he! The arrow in his side? Ah, yes—that at least he had brought with him from the ship! That and the greater wound from which his life was flowing!

There was a chiming. A bell was striking—one, two, three! The clock! Of course—this was a world of time! Not like that world of the ship—

The ship!

He staggered over to where lay that shining craft of mystery that had given him all his heart and mind had craved—and at the last had taken all away.

Sharane!

There she lay—on the platform beside the rowers' pit not far from the deck of ivory. A gleaming little three inch toy—

a gemmed puppet with tiny dagger hilt fast in her white breast! Sharane!

Sharane—who had held for him all joy, all sweetness of life, all desirable delicious things—a witched toy! He shook his head—never would that doubt assail him again!

And that black headless manikin so close? The black priest!

Toys? He set his hand again to the wound in his side, felt of the arrow—and laughed! No toys had made that wound, no toy sped that shaft!

But where were the soldiers from the *bireme*? He looked upon the ship's stern. There lay another puppet, one with yellow hair and chipped and gashed armor, sword still clasped in hand—Sigurd!

And the two slim warriors stretched beside him? Why, they were the maids of Sharane who had fought there with him.

And there—there beyond the headless body of the black priest—was Gigi! Gigi with his great arms a-sprawl, his dwarf legs drawn under him! Gigi with his little bald head shining under a ray of the electrics!

Gigi!

Kenton's hand left Sharane, the toy—caressed the grotesque puppet.

But where were the soldiers? Where that other maid of his lost love?

He bent forward, incredulous. The whole bow of the ship was gone! It had vanished even as he had knelt there! Melted away—and with it the rosy cabin of Sharane's and his delight!

And as he looked the ship seemed to lurch! As cabin had gone so went ivory deck up to the rowers' pit and with it—Gigi!

Even the toy going! Was that, too, to be taken from him before he followed Sharane out into that flame lit space of his vision?

If such place there was—

Longing for her, longing for her kisses, the touch of her hands, the sound of her voice shook him; loneliness and the pall of the utterly forlorn.

"Sharane!" he whispered, and gripped the little puppet with trembling hand. "Sharane!" he called and again "Sharane! Beloved! Wait for me!"

The ship crumbled to within an inch of where she lay!

"Sharane!" wailed Kenton—and above him the servants heard that agonized cry and came hurrying to his door.

And now he threw the last of his strength into the gripping fingers, wrenched loose the little figure, held it to his lips!

And now where ship had been was nothing but the oblong base of foam crested turquoise waves! Down had gone the galley of the black priest into the depths of that strange sea, dragging with it, as it went, the Ship of Ishtar. So Kenton knew, and knowing that as ran the fate of living ship so must run the fate of the toy which was its symbol!

The bell chime echoed back into his brain—

Three o'clock!

Nine hours of the time of this world into which he had been born had passed since first he had set foot on the ship's deck—nine hours only!

Only nine hours—and in those nine hours he had been both slave and master of the ship, had been lashed and loved, had drunk his fill of life, lived as it is given to but few men in tens of centuries—

Had possessed—Sharane!

Sharane!

He pressed the toy to his lips. Weakened, death close, that toy he held to lips and breast was to him—Sharane!

There was a knocking at the door, rappings and cries. He gave them no heed.

"Sharane!" he called again, but now with voice that sang with joy!

He fell, the toy at lips, gripped tight in stiffening hand.

"Break down the door!" shrilled Jevins from the hall. There came the thud of shoulders against the heavy wood.

Where ship had been something stirred; a shadowy great bird with silver wings and breast and feet and bill of scarlet. It arose; it hovered over Kenton.

A dove of Ishtar!

It hovered—and then upon its white breast two flames whiter than it appeared and clung!

The shadowy dove was gone!

In crashed the door.

"Master John!" screamed Jevins, and ran to the body stretched out there on the floor.

"That's not the master!" a maid whispered. "Look at the scars on him! And the muscles!"

Kenton lay upon his face. Gently they turned him.

His dead face smiled up at them—peace upon it and a great happiness. Fulfillment!

"Master John!" wept old Jevins. "Oh Master John!"

"What's he holding in his hand?" whispered another servant.

The hand was at Kenton's lips, clenched viselike. They pried open at last the stubborn fingers.

But Kenton's hand was—

Empty!

D. Bagatelle

VIRGIL FINLAY

Virgil Finlay, the artist who consistently polls in #1 place when the aficionados of fantasy art vote annually for their favorite, is a 35-year-old son of Rochester, N. Y.

His distinctive work, famous for its intricate beauty, has been featured in *Famous Fantastic Mysteries, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Weird Tales, Strange Stories* and other American imaginative periodicals, as well as *Los Cuentos Fantasticos* of Mexico.

He has illustrated an edition of Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream" and Seabury Quinn's "Roads".

Three portfolios of his work have been collected.

So popular was he with A. Merritt that, while Merritt was editor of *The American Weekly*, he invited Finlay to join his art staff.

Connoisseurs of fantasy artwork demanded Finlay for the Memorial Edition of THE SHIP OF ISHTAR.

BORDEN PUBLISHING CO.
3077 Wabash Avenue
Los Angeles 33, Calif.

MEMORIAL EDITION

ABRAHAM MERRITT

THE LORD OF FANTASY

by Forrest J. Ackerman

Six years have passed since Abraham Merritt, aged 59, died of a heart attack. Or, if you prefer, went "Thru the Dragon Glass" and into the unknown Beyond, for an author of Merritt's stature does not die. Scarcely a year passes but what one of his masterpieces — "The Moon Pool", "The Dwellers in the Mirage", "The Woman of the Wood" — is not reprinted. Next to Edgar Rice Burroughs he is probably the most reprinted fantasy author in America.

A. Merritt was born in Beverly, N. J., 20 January 1884. He completed the first year of high school. While still in his teens he went treasure hunting in Yucatan, and was one of the first white men in 100 years to enter the ancient Mayan city of Tuluum. At 18 he became a reporter on the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He rose rapidly as a feature writer, covering murders, suicides, hangings and mysteries. By 24 he was Night Editor.

1937 found Merritt editor of *The American Weekly*. He still found time for writing, producing the popular "Burn Witch Burn!" (subsequently translated into French, Spanish, Dutch and Russian) and "Creep, Shadow!" The former was filmed as "The Devil Doll", starring Lionel Barrymore.

His hobby was subtropical horticulture, and he grew many exotic and poisonous plants. He was also an expert apiarist. He was a member of the Lotos club.

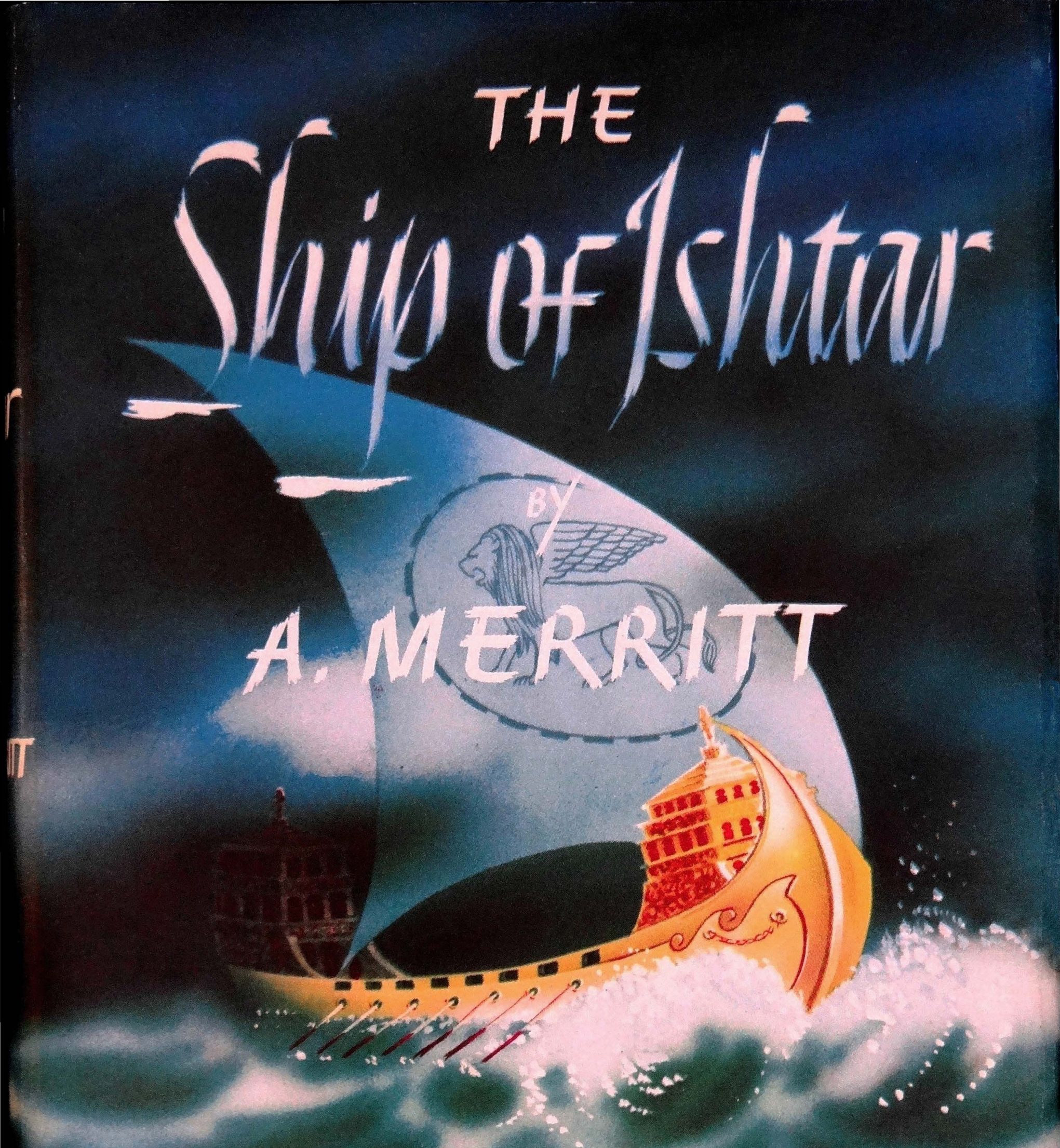
Thus, A. Merritt — a legend in his time. Feet firmly planted behind a hard-headed editorial desk, heart ever succumbing to the siren call and the tinkle of invisible elfin bells.

Of his stories he once said, "I weave much of what I have seen, heard and read of strange rites, of superstitions, of science, of religion. They are fantastic, but they are accurate and they are very unusual."

THE Ship of Ishtar

BY

A. MERRITT



Illustrated by VIRGIL FINLAY

MEMORIAL EDITION

Cirlin